



Test screenings

We visited cinemas all over Britain to find out whether our multiplexes and arthouses are picture palaces or fleapits

Despite all the digital wizardry in our living rooms, many people still feel you can't beat the silver-screen experience. A survey of Which? members reveals that more than two thirds visited a cinema once or more in the past year and that 12 per cent went more than six times.

In the past decade, there's been a marked revival of interest in cinema going. During the first half of 2007, British cinemas clocked up between 10 and 15 million admissions a month. And they aren't just the preserve of the young, either.

The number of older visitors is increasing (over-45s make up 24 per cent of total audiences, compared with just 14 per cent a decade ago). With more mature audiences comes a demand for a more varied programme. And certainly among our members, it appears that tastes are broadening beyond the blockbusters. Our survey showed that almost a third had visited an independent or arthouse cinema recently.

Britain now has about 700 commercial cinemas containing nearly 3,500 screens. Three large chains dominate the industry. Odeon is the largest, with more than 100 outlets in Britain, followed by Cineworld and Vue. There are also several smaller chains

such as Showcase and Apollo as well as art-house chains such as Reel and Picturehouse

In our survey, members rated sound and picture quality, auditorium comfort, and location as the key factors affecting their enjoyment of a visit. We analysed these factors as well as cost, ease of booking, range of food and drink and customer service to assess the current state of British cinemas.

Just the ticket

Most cinemas offer advance booking systems, online or by phone, and all charge a fee (about 60p a ticket). The advantages, in theory, are that you avoid queuing or a wasted journey if tickets are sold out. In many cinemas, however, you can't choose specific seats, so even if you book ahead, you may not get the seats you want.



You can pay not only a booking fee but an extra phone charge on top of your ticket price

The Vue website where you can book tickets, but they'll cost more than the box office

We looked at booking systems for all the cinema chains we visited. The phone booking lines mostly use 0871 numbers and cumbersome voice-recognition systems, which can take several minutes to wade through. We found the worst was Vue, which took more than three and half minutes just to get to the point where you give your credit card details. That also means you pay not only a booking fee but an extra phone charge on top of your ticket price – you could end up paying about £1 more than the actual ticket price. Members felt this was unfair and that pre-booked tickets either online (where the lack of overheads usually keeps prices down) or over the phone should cost less as they take up less staff time. 'I really resent being charged a fee to book tickets,' said one respondent. See 'Checklist', p15, for ways to save money on tickets.

And pre-booking systems aren't fool-proof. Even with email confirmations or reference numbers, members told us that cinemas make mistakes or dishonour bookings on arrival. We noticed that several ticket collection machines were out of order on our visits. In Cineworld, Wandsworth, south London, we met one distraught mother with two young children who had



An ultra-modern Vue multiplex

lost her credit card in a machine and couldn't find anyone to help her.

The out of towners

One in five of the respondents to our survey rated location as the most important factor. It's certainly something to investigate if you're visiting an unfamiliar cinema for the first time. Town-centre cinemas are mostly well-served by public transport but daytime parking can be difficult to find and extortionately expensive. Conversely, out-of-town multiplexes may be harder to reach without a car, especially in the evenings, but they usually have plenty of convenient parking space, often free of charge. If you plan to drive, try to choose a secure parking place. Several members mentioned that the prospect of theft and vandalism deterred them from cinema going. 'Sadly, the risk of damage or theft of my transport to the cinema does weigh strongly,' said one respondent.

Comfort and joy

The standards of facilities, cleanliness, comfort and access in the cinemas we inspected varied greatly. Some cinema foyers were welcoming with an enticing bar or café. Others were bleak, gloomy queueing halls reverberating with noisy soundtracks.

We encountered auditoria awash with popcorn and so sticky with spilled drinks that our shoes stuck to the floor. 'I'm often appalled at the disgusting state the auditorium is in,' said one disgruntled member in our survey. One of the messiest we found in our inspections was the AMC cinema in Manchester, while one of the most dispiriting was the Birmingham Odeon on New Street. Our inspector found that the foyer, auditorium and WCs were cramped and shabby, and access for disabled visitors was not easy with steps to upper and lower levels. Stairlifts had been installed but they were not in use.



ARTHOUSE ALL THE WAY FOR COUPLE

Craig Stubbs 28, and Emma Medcalf 26,
finance manager and midwife

Craig and Emma visited their local Cineworld and an independent cinema called The Broadway in Nottingham. They found themselves in agreement with many of our members, as they both preferred the independent option, even though it was smaller and older.

'Cineworld was well

designed, modern and clean, but ultimately faceless,' said Craig. They enjoyed the personal touches at The Broadway.

'The guy selling us the tickets had a chat with us about the film,' said Craig. They also liked its candlelit bar, where you could have a proper meal rather than just cinema snacks.

However, many cinemas are modern or have been recently refurbished. There's no doubt that these newer premises are more spacious, comfortable and convenient than

the shabby fleapits of yesteryear. New multiplexes have plenty of WCs in bright, stylish blocks, and easy access for wheelchair users via wide, level or gently sloping corridors, with lifts where necessary. Many now provide induction loop, subtitle or audio-description facilities for sight- or hearing-impaired visitors.

In a few older-style cinemas we visited, some of which are listed buildings dating from the 1920s or 30s, access for wheelchair users is quite impossible. All the managers we spoke to said they did their best to accommodate visitors with mobility problems but in some cases they advised wheelchair users to try a more suitable venue. We believe that limitations such as these should be made very clear in publicity material, which doesn't always happen at present. If you have a disability, you should contact the cinema before your visit.



The Broadway, Nottingham foyer is clear and well laid out

in towns in various regions around the five cities and in Belfast.

In June 2007, 864 Which? online panel members completed a survey to tell us about their recent experiences of going to the cinema.

Food and drink scored the lowest satisfaction levels of any category in our survey



OUR RESEARCH

A Which? inspector visited 25 cinemas in July/August 2007, five in each of the following British cities – Cardiff, Edinburgh, London, Birmingham and Manchester. In each location, we chose examples from the three major chains

plus some from smaller chains and independents, assessing them for cleanliness, comfort, cost and accessibility. We also analysed the range of films being shown and the food and drinks on sale.

We looked at prices

a finding that matched our inspector's experiences. Members felt that the range of refreshments on sale was limited, unhealthy and expensive. 'I just could not believe the price of a large bucket of popcorn. I really thought it included the price of the ticket,' said one member.

Choice at the big chains typically consists of sweets, hot dogs, nachos and popcorn. For many cinema goers, these snacks are all part of the fun. But most of the snacks are packed with salt, fat and sugar. And



MULTIPLEX KEEPS OUR FAMILY HAPPY

Susan Trainor 49, nursery manager

Susan and her daughters Chloë (13) and Claudia (12) live in County Antrim, Northern Ireland. They recently visited a small chain cinema called Moviehouse and an Omniplex cinema (part of a chain belonging to Ireland's leading cinema operator, Ward Anderson).

The whole family preferred the larger Omniplex cinema, where it was easier to park. It had a pleasant atmosphere,

despite the spilt popcorn on the floor. Susan said: 'In the Moviehouse cinema, the seats weren't on a slope so you were very aware of other people's heads.'

They found staff in both cinemas very friendly. Susan had to ask staff to intervene when children began throwing popcorn about at Moviehouse, but they managed to resolve the situation and everyone calmed down.

they're incredibly expensive. A 225g packet of Minstrels, currently priced at £1.25 in Tesco or Asda, costs about twice that in a cinema foyer. A 'combo' bucket of popcorn and a soft drink typically costs about the same as a peak-time adult cinema ticket (around £6.15), thus doubling your outlay at a stroke. 'The snack prices charged of captive customers with children borders on extortion,' said one member.

The food on offer is often relentlessly targeted at children, with promotional drink-and-popcorn deals linked to popular children's films like *Shrek the Third* or *The Simpsons*. Bigger servings are priced to encourage increased consumption with its associated health and obesity risks (see 'Which?' says, p15, for more on this).

Picture perfect

Around three in ten of those surveyed said that sound and picture quality affected their enjoyment of a cinema visit the most – and you're unlikely to experience a technical hitch. Britain has the biggest proportion of digital screens in Europe, and sound and picture quality are resoundingly high tech.

However, a common complaint concerned the volume of the soundtrack, which was often felt to be quite overwhelming, especially during trailers and adverts. 'The sound in general is much too loud and distorted,' said one respondent.

In terms of the range of films on offer, we discovered that this could be disappointingly limited – especially in the big chains during school holidays. At one 18-screen London cinema (Greenwich Odeon), which we visited at a weekend, our inspector had a choice of just five films, all blockbusters.

In contrast, the Cameo Picturehouse in Edinburgh, with just three screens, was showing six different films on the day we visited, with much wider audience appeal. As one of our panel said: 'Many of the best-reviewed films never make it to our local

screens, which cater for younger audiences.'

Indeed, many of the members in our survey felt that independent or arthouse cinemas offered better choice, even though they are usually much smaller.

Ordinary people

One of the biggest causes of complaint for our survey panel was the behaviour of other visitors. Many members felt that cinemas failed to supervise disruptive visitors adequately. We found that one of the main reasons could be that staffing levels are very low in some of the big chains at certain times of day. The same handful of staff had to sell tickets and refreshments and then monitor as many as 30 separate screens.

In contrast, staff at arthouse cinemas such as Picturehouse and Screen usher visitors to their seats and maintain a visible presence during the film. We asked managers about their policy on dealing with troublemakers. All the main chains say they operate a 'three strikes' rule (three warnings, then you're out).



Crowds pile in at the Odeon West End

Staff say they patrol screens while films are showing and projectionists also keep an eye out for disruptive behaviour. But the onus still seems to be on individual customers to complain, an intimidating prospect at times.

The verdict

Of the cinemas we visited this summer, Picturehouses were our inspector's favourites. The personal touch, the caf  bars, nostalgic auditoria, dedication to serving local communities and ambitious range of films at this independent group were impressive.

Our survey showed a clear preference for smaller independent cinemas over the big chains among many members, though some older-style independents we visited

Contacts

Cineworld

0871 200 2000
www.cineworld.co.uk

Curzon

www.curzoncinemas.com

Empire

www.empirecinemas.co.uk

Picturehouses

www.picturehouses.co.uk

Reel www.reelcinemas.co.uk

Showcase 0871 220 1000
www.showcasecinemas.co.uk

Odeon 0871 224 4007

www.odeon.co.uk

Vue 0871 224 0240

www.myvue.com



An eclectic selection at an arthouse

had poor facilities, particularly for people who are disabled.

Among the big chains, our survey panel members preferred Vue cinemas overall, with Odeon in second place. But our inspection visits revealed wide variations between individual cinemas. While we were impressed by the comfortable seating in the auditoria and high standard of picture quality in the new multiplexes, ticket costs (particularly with extras such as booking fees – see ‘How ticket prices vary around the UK’, below,) and the range of food and drink on offer leave a lot to be desired (see ‘Which? says’, right).

WHICH? SAYS

Cinemas need to have healthier food choices

Which? is currently campaigning against the marketing of unhealthy food with high levels of sugar, fat and salt to children. We recognise that popcorn is a cinema tradition but we’d like to see some healthy snacks on sale alongside the treat items in cinemas – and

without the excessive pricing that often far outstrips other outlets’.

We also don’t believe that the ‘three strikes’ rule for troublemakers goes far enough and we think there should be increased staff supervision to stop the film being spoilt by a few thoughtless visitors.

How ticket prices vary around the UK

Standard entry to your local cinema can cost anything from £3.50 to over £12

The table shows the cheapest and most expensive cinemas in the cities we inspected, nearby towns in that region and Northern Ireland. We found the cost of tickets varies considerably. For example, a standard adult ticket at the 14-screen Showcase in Manchester is £2.25 cheaper than the city’s Odeon. Costs in the table don’t include booking fees or phone charges.

While prices may still compare favourably with a visit to the theatre, for example, they can soon mount up, especially for a family.

Not surprisingly, the biggest variations in prices are in the capital. Tickets for Odeon cinemas in London are between £8 (the cinema we visited was in Greenwich, south London) and £10, while the flagship cinema in Leicester Square is £12.50.

The same is true of the Vue chain. The Vue we visited in Shepherd’s Bush cost £7.75, while the Vue, Leicester Square, only five miles away, is £4 more expensive. We contacted the chains to discover why this was the case. ‘Our ticket

prices are based on the cost of overheads, staff and location,’ was the response from Vue. Odeon’s response was similar: ‘Ticket prices in central London slightly differ from those in other areas due to significantly higher costs for building rental and staff wages.’

However, if you want to see a film in central London, you may be able to save money by heading for cinemas on the fringes of the West End, such as those on Tottenham Court Road, Covent Garden or Shaftesbury Avenue.

REGION	TYPE OF CINEMA	NAME OF CINEMA	LOCATION	NO. OF SCREENS	PRICE (£) ^a
BIRMINGHAM	Chain	Vue	Birmingham	24	6.60
BIRMINGHAM	Chain	Odeon	Birmingham	8	5.40
CARDIFF	Chain	Odeon	Cardiff	18	6.50
CARDIFF	Independent	City Cinema	Newport	3	3.50
EDINBURGH	Chain	Odeon	Fort Kinnaird	12	7.00
EDINBURGH	Independent	Playhouse – Caledonian Cinemas	Perth	6	5.00
LONDON	Chain	Odeon	Leicester Square	6	12.50
LONDON	Chain	Showcase	Newham	14	6.40
MANCHESTER	Chain	Odeon	Manchester	23	7.00
MANCHESTER	Chain	Showcase	Manchester	14	4.75
NORTHERN IRELAND	Chain ^b	Storm Cinemas	Belfast	12	5.80
NORTHERN IRELAND	Chain ^b	Cineplex and Strand ^c	Belfast	5	4.50

^a Adult peak times ^b Big three chains aren’t in Northern Ireland ^c Joint cheapest

Checklist

How to save money and get added value from your visit

■ **Go in person** Where practical, try to avoid booking online or by phone – you’ll save money on booking fees and call charges.

■ **Parking** Many cinemas offer free or discounted parking onsite or at nearby car parks. You may need to validate your parking ticket at the box office.

■ **Early doors** You can often save money on tickets if you go earlier in the day (check cinema for times as they often differ).

■ **Groups** Family tickets can save money for any group of adults and children.

■ **Special offers** Vue cinemas have a deal called Vuemore Tuesdays at discounted rates and money-off vouchers for a future visit. Cineworld offers an ‘Unlimited’ card. For £10.99 a month, you can see as many films as you like (although you have to sign up for a year). If you are an Orange mobile customer, look out for special offers such as Orange Wednesdays, where you can claim two cinema tickets for the price of one.

■ **Special screenings** Odeon, Picturehouse and Vue have concessionary screenings for older audiences (over 60) on quiet weekdays with free tea or coffee and biscuits. There are also kids’ clubs (weekend showings of children’s films at very cheap rates – adults usually get in free) and parent and baby/toddler screenings.

■ **First class** If you’re looking for a special night out, some chain cinemas offer ‘Gallery’, ‘Gold Class’ or ‘Premiere’ seating as an optional extra. You pay a higher price for your ticket, which may include free popcorn and a drink, and have the exclusive use of a smart bar area and the best seats in the house.