

A Proper Time in the UK – Fall Break Amongst Those Proper Folk

Did you ever find yourself in Sri Lanka, trying to get to Ecuador in a fast, cost efficient manner? Well I have. Try as I might, there were just no options that didn't involve a few oddly timed layovers in such opulent places like Newark, NJ or Fort Lauderdale....so I broke up the voyage into two parts and built a "vacation" into my travel plans.

After the "near-miss" which was Sri Lanka, I stowed my hopes and dreams along with my carryon into the over-head compartment headed the UK.

My "lifetime" of travel contains many quirks...been to the Eiffel Tower twice, Sears (Willis) tower in Chicago-never. Antarctica yes, but never farther than Zone 1 in London..and I'm not even sure London counts as "England Proper" since it seems so different than the countryside...but at least now I know the difference.

To Recap:

We "yanks" don't use the term "lovely" much... and hardly ever use it to describe a town or village, but when I told a gaggle of Brits (and yes, a group of Brits is a "gaggle" or "rafter", but never a "bunch" that's for bananas) that I was heading to York, they all said, "oh it's lovely there"....and you know, it really was.

But I landed in London on a Friday morning and went almost directly onto a bus to take me to Leeds, about a five-hour journey. There was a football match to catch the following day. Real English football, played in the country that invented it all. I was going to a Leeds United match.

I had met this guy Jordan in Sri Lanka and he was an ardent fan, which was great. The fact that he was connected to get us tickets was even more important as they tend to sell out. We met in the morning for a little pre-match fortification, a "small breakfast" of fried eggs, baked beans and toast with a pint of ale to wet the whistle..there was more whistle wetting as soon as we got inside the grounds... While the English don't exactly "tailgate" since most don't have cars, but you meet in a field and they serve beer and there's a band, so it's more like a yard-party...with a purpose....We Are Leeds!

The game was a thing of beauty, but around the 50th minute, our side went down a goal on a questionable call..from our vantage, about three city blocks away it was harsh... my sponsor, Jordan was apoplectic with worry that our Leeds would taste defeat...but thankfully an equalizer came in the 80th minute..sometimes you take the point and go home...

Jordan was finally able to synthesize what had happened to "our boys" and there were injuries that had sapped our cohesive nature but we should take comfort in the fact that our side had the discipline and fine training to overcome adverse officiating...or so went the wisdom as we exited the kop.

Leaving a relieved Jordan, I made it back to my hostel to retrieve my bags and move onto York, to see if it was in fact "lovely" ...and it was. I stayed at a place called "Astor York" which was a converted hostel/ B&B with a great vibe. As for York, America might have had places like this, but perhaps they got

crushed under the weight of the industrial revolution. York reminded me of those “Village 56” houses people collect...there was a river, a narrow crooked street and a ‘minster’ to see, as well as the National Train Museum...my two days there were filled. I had my first English “pie” but made the mistake of asking what was inside...the server’s reply was “well it’s just like a Yorkshire pudding” ...I was about to ask what THAT was, but sometimes you just eat the pie...and it was lovely. The weather cooperated and I got my steps in and even visited a fry shop, which, as the name indicates, fries everything...one fry cook, forty choices, all going into the same fryer. That was not lovely, but shops close early in lovely towns.

From York, it was onto Liverpool for three days getting my “Beatles” on...there was the Cavern club, museums, a beach full of naked men statues and a bombed out church to visit. Here it rained, but you always have a raincoat at the ready and nothing lasts for long...except the Beatles.

Liverpool is where I waded into the amazing world of British buffet dining. Make no mistake, the UK can quickly shrivel your wallet if you’re not careful. All this amazingly different food and exotic sounding beers ales and ciders, but rarely is anything less than a “five-er” which is \$7... so a bit about the food.

There are “local shops” around most corners, not as frequent as pubs, but enough of them. Sainsbury’s and Tesco, but I’m a Sainsbury man, if only because they package the most delicious chocolate chip cookies, five for 1-pound 10.. but cookies can only get you thru a day or too. I know, I tried. Most sandwich shops, cafes, places with seats, can feed you something for around 10 pound; \$14. Yikes.. Being curious, I came across a buffet and thus started the investigation.

England, having conquered many wonderful and exotic lands, benefits from a wealth of cultures, and the buffet culture is something they take seriously. In America, the buffet is often thought of as the “trough of last resort”; a refuge for the calorically dependent to sate their needs among less judgemental co-conspirators. But like with many things I experienced in the UK, there’s just a more civilized way to do it here.

The Brit buffets are often termed “World Buffets” where they mix, English, Indian, Oriental, and Italian food stations, with chefs working out in the open.... With carpeted floors and even mood lighting. I visited my first in Liverpool and it was really something. If a burger and chips is going to cost me close to 8-pound, then let’s spend around 12-pound to do this right.

A proper gastronomic tour of the world still takes about an hour, but it carries you through the next day easily. The pattern established, it became semi-fast-hit a buffet-then fast...and the budget stretches.

Liverpool led me back to Leeds where I caught up with two friends whom I had traveled thru Africa with back in 2011 when at least they were much younger. These two, Mel and Jed are now married and showed off a relatively new 2yr old named Amadis (means God’s love, also a character from Don Quixote) who generally seemed perplexed by my presence.

The four of us took a tour of a local brewery, watched one of my travel shows and fit in a “proper” English Sunday Roast...it was all comfort food and I ate a couch-worth...it was very comfortable.

Leeds led to Scotland and five days in Edinburgh. I did it all; hiked up to Arthur's Chair, walked along the Leith River, thru all the museums (except the castle) and even helped a street performer do a straight-jacket escape.

straightjacketphoto

The fall colors were just about to change, so the camera got plenty of work and I was SO thankful that I planned out five days...four would have been too short and six would have been too long.

But as those who have been, and as I learned, there are steps in Edinburgh...LOTS of steps. My trusty Maps.me informed me the quickest way to my hostel (Castle Rock, it's lovely) was a straight line up a mile of stairs to Edinburgh Castle. I think I was glad this was done after sun-down, since the sight of all those stairs would be a motivation killer; and like with the final push up Kilimanjaro, somethings are better off done in darkness.

It took me a day to make my peace with the stairs and while I don't spring up them like a goat anymore, I was in less discomfort. There is a nearby village called "Dean" which, again, was lovely

Dean pictures

There was a "China Red" buffet down in the village that gets "four-forks" ..fresh seafood from the Black Sea grilled to order.

But since you mentioned food, I hath met the haggis. I was worried. I actually had less trepidation eating that monkey back in Colombia, that tackling that haggis. But crossing the threshold of the shop, I felt resigned to my fate. If this was to be the meal that killed Santa, then so be it; but even THIS was delightful.

Talking with "Willie" the haggis-master at the "Clamshell" takeaway on High Street, the "old way" of serving haggis was to boil the snot out of the thing thing, leaching off all the taste and leaving you with a great plate of flop. But Willie's gastronomic research, and the larger capacity of the Eldon 3400LN deep fryer he mans thirteen hours a day, the real secret to great cooking is the lard; animal fat. A haggis and chips will set you back almost a fiver, but well worth the experience.

Haggis pictures

Edinburgh to Glasgow was only forty-five minutes, but a world of difference. Glasgow was all the business without the castles and steep steps of Edinburgh. I spent a day on a city-wide tour of street art, then took a tour up to Glencoe the next ...my first day with sustained rains.

You learn so much on tours, some history, some scenery...there was this coastal town of Oban, that had this roman coliseum built by a rich benefactor after the war...We had a few hours to explore, so I hiked up to get my shots. Then there was mention of a seafood place that was incredibly cheap down by the wharf. It took a bit to find, but sitting out by the water, eating a few kilos of steamed mussels was amazing.

Oban shots,

Glasgow brought me to Oxford where the thought was to visit the Bates collection of musical instruments. I had visited the collection in Edinburgh and it to, was lovely; conversely the Oxford collection was not. Too many instruments in too little space with too little lighting...the visit was around twenty minutes..

But the buffet was a wonder, a chain called "Cosmo". A bit more expensive than the others, but yowza it was good..more fresh seafood.

And then it was back to London, where this all began. I stayed at a place called Astor Victoria, sister to Astor York, and enjoyed the same great hang, but this one had Netflix on a 10-foot digital projector. Portobello Road, Old Spitafields, and some museums filled my time.

My three weeks in the UK seemed to fly by in retrospect, but there was enough time to absorb each stop (and a buffet) and make me hopeful for a return to see the rest in the future..thinking back on the rest of the places I've been so far, I can't say there's an urge to "get back" to any of them...maybe Poland...

But now, I head to Ecuador and my last semester in the Life PHD program. It's been an amazing course-load, taking me from Africa to Nepal, Mongolia to Antarctica, Scotland to New Zealand...and still about ten weeks left.

The backpacks never seem to get any lighter, but my mood had definitely been on the upswing of late.

Things of note:

The "Mind the Gap" warnings on the tube have been watered down to now explain what the "gap" is...gave me a sadz

England Mustard is sharp, like a slap in the face, you've been warned.

National Express busses are great, timely and have charging ports and wifi...

There are plenty of great ciders in Scotland, but don't give the whiskey a pass...they do it well

Haggis is a thing that must be tried...get the "Edinburgh sauce" as well

It isn't Iron, and it isn't Brewed but "Irn Brw" is worth trying..it looks like a rusty bolt got dropped in carbonated water, but the taste is unique....and not in a bad way.

There are pretzels in the UK, but they were not good

Most things are just done "right" in the UK...but they've had a few thousand years more practice than we "yanks"...

Oh, how I shall miss those Sainsbury's Chocolate Chip 5-packs.. you sustained me almost daily in the UK..where one package never seemed enough, there was always another "local" around the corner.

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