

My Passport to Paradise

Off the Beaten Patch: If you're looking for an incredible journey, a trip to England is just the ticket.

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Exciting. Captivating. Addicting.

These are the words people used to describe the London 2012 Olympics. But to me, this describes England.

NBC announced that this summer's Olympics had more viewers than any other event in U.S. television history. I was one of those 219 million viewers and probably logged close to 90 hours over the 17 days -- not only to watch the athletes compete, but to see sights and hear the sounds that make England my favorite place in the world.

Like you I was wide-eyed and breathless watching Gabby Douglas and all the world-class athletes go for the gold. But my enthusiasm and Olympic addiction had almost as much to do with the travelogues and side stories as it did the athletes. You see, for 17 days straight I could live vicariously through Tom Brokaw.

My love affair with England started in December 1974 when I landed at Heathrow with 16 other Illinois State University students for a study abroad program in Brighton. I knew little about England. Less than a little. While I knew England was in Europe I thought it was connected to France. Really. I knew nothing about the Royal Family either. When my friend and I ran in to a Holiday Inn to use the bathroom and I saw a family portrait hanging behind the front desk I said to her, “Oh how sweet. They have a picture of the owner and their family.” She told me it was the Queen. Honestly. You can’t make this stuff up.

Maybe because I knew so little I was able to learn so much.

It took a while for us to fit in with the British students — we were, after all, Americans. Loud Americans. I think every time one of us would say, “Hey you guys” or “Look how old this is,” they would cringe. But after a few weeks, our non-stop bantering and infectious laughter won them over. Of course, you guessed it. I cut class more than anyone else on our program but I couldn’t see the point of sitting in a boring lecture with characters right out of Hogwarts starting a sentence with, no kidding, “The trained eye of the historian can plainly see....” I thought, Screw this; the best way to learn about England was to see England and that’s exactly what I did.

There was nothing quite like the chill I experienced when I stood in the silent walls of St. Georges Chapel at Windsor Castle, looking down and realizing I was standing beside the grave of King Henry VIII. Or seeing Charles Dickens’ signature in the guest book at William Shakespeare’s house. America was getting ready to celebrate its bicentennial and I was standing in battle ruins dating back to 1066. I couldn’t believe that I was so close to all the places and events I studied growing up. Mind you, we were college students and this was the era of disco. We danced our way through Donna Summer and did the Hustle with our British mates who, in the end, hated to see their colonial cousins leave.

But leave we did. And no sooner had we touched down at Chicago’s O’Hare before I was calculating how and when I could go back.

In 1976 when I returned to ISU for my senior year, I moved back on campus just so I could live in International House. I was a journalism major and my internship was in the University’s Office of Public Affairs. One of my first assignments was to write a piece for the university’s parent and faculty newspaper. The Study Abroad Program was still in its infancy and the university thought a first person story would encourage others to participate.

I sat down at the typewriter and tapped out the following: “It seems like only yesterday I was standing in a small street in Rottingdean looking out over the English Channel. The smell of fresh baked bread filled the air as the morning mist lightly sprayed my rosy cheeks.”

At that moment I realized two things. One, I loved to write, and two, I loved England.

After graduation all I could think about was going to back. Not just to visit but to live. That's when I found out something else about myself. I loved goals and nothing was going to stop me from fulfilling this one.

Of course I had to make reaching my goals fun and creative, so I drew a picture of the British Isles (yes I learned it was an island) and every penny I saved, I colored in a little bit more of the country. When the red crayon reached Inverness I knew I had saved enough. So I left my family and a wonderful job and moved to the coast of Sussex. I lived in a lovely flat with my English friend Sue and made the most of every day. I tried to take in as much of England as I could and in the end was able to see so much of this incredible country. I looked at everything good or bad, as good. Even when it poured I didn't complain -- after all, it was English rain!

I eventually did learn about the Queen and became obsessed with everything royal. It was spring 1980 and I remember saying to my boyfriend Perry, "I think she's the one. I think Diana is going to marry Charles." Well, and it hasn't let up since. Now I am a full-blown Anglophile (even stood when they played God Save the Queen at Royal Jubilee). I was even invited to .

Like you, I am smitten with the British accent and everything they say just sounds better than when we say it. My first trip however was like scene from Love Actually where they say, "Say bottle. Say Orange" and then everyone giggles. Even though we all speak English, their words, and the way they say it, is ever so different. See? But living there I caught on quickly. When I would run down to the store (pop into the shoppe) for things (bits and bobs) I would first stop at the ATM (cash point). Then, if I wanted to buy dish soap, oatmeal, garbage bags, Scotch tape, Saran wrap, ground beef, Band-Aids, Tylenol and English muffins, I knew to ask for washing up liquid, porridge, bin bags, Sellotape, clingfilm, mince meat, plasters, paracetamol and crumpets. Oh, and jolly good if they were on special offer (sale) too! I still pop into Tesco or Sainsbury's every time I'm back because it's fun to see how different not only the packaging and names are but to see all the different foods they have like oxtail soup and spotted dick.

When my Foreign National visa ran out and I had to return to the States, I cried the entire transatlantic flight home. Of course I was only home an hour before I was figuring out a way to go back, and back I went. This back and forth lasted until I finally moved to Walnut Creek in 1982.

Since then, I have probably been back to England more than 20 times and am planning my next visit even as we speak.

Whether it's Skyping with my friends, reading the Daily Mail Online or watching The King's Speech for the umpteenth time, there is a little bit of England in my every day. And thank goodness for public television and BBC America. From the mid-1970s, I always had a date with Alistair Cooke and Masterpiece Theatre on Sunday night. And since there was no such

thing as a VCR I had to set my watch and be on time (just like British Rail). Fast forward (literally) 35 years to Downton Abbey and now everyone has figured out what I've been going on about when you watched Anna fall in love with Mr. Bates.

Friends and relatives always ask me why I keep going back to England when there are so many other places to go. I have spent New Year's Eve on the Champs-Élysées, Holy Week in Rome, Greek Easter in Greece and Rosh Hashanah in Jerusalem, but nothing says holiday to me more than England. Even in the dead of winter when others are dreaming of their tropical paradise on an island in the Pacific, I'm dreaming of Paddington. What can I say? I love the British Isles. There is something prolific about walking around their castles, cathedrals and National Trust homes that never grows old. The last time I visited I coerced my friend Rosie to take me to see Jane Austen's house. When we stood there, looking across at the piano forte and writing desk I was speechless. Was that really the quill she used to write Pride and Prejudice and Sense and Sensibility? Mind you, there was a gift shop adjacent to the garden and I left with postcards of Mr Darcy and Pemberley.

If I close my eyes and concentrate I can almost hear Elizabeth Bennett speaking.

I have helped dozens of friends plan their trips to the British Isles and the two things they always fear is the weather and the food. Well the weather sucks or, as my friend Rosie says, "is complete rubbish." That's why the picture I chose for this story isn't of me standing soaking wet in front of Big Ben or Oxford University, it's taken inside my flat. Yes, the weather is usually bad but get over it. And the British food? It's fabulous. Yes, I said fabulous. It is perfectly normal for the British to have beans on toast for lunch, but excuse me, how is that any less exciting than our peanut butter and jelly? No one makes stew like the Irish or scones like the Scots. To me, British beef with a side of Yorkshire Pudding or traditional fish 'n chips is heaven on earth. And if you don't want British food while you're visiting, no worries, you are in an absolute culinary mecca. Especially in London. If your taste buds are in the mood for Italian, French, Polish, Indian or Greek, you are going to get the best there is because the chef preparing it literally just got off the boat. There is amazing food there and lest we forget the best part...you need a month and an extra pair of stretch pants to savor their chocolate, sweets and baked goods.

By golly, the history

But the food isn't what draws anyone to England, it's the people, the architecture and by golly the history. When I visit these days of course I spend a few frantic days in London, seeing some West End shows, going to museums and hitting my favourite stores like Fortnum and Mason, Liberty and Waterstons, but it's my days out of London that I cherish the most. I love taking a picturesque train ride to a quaint little village. I love walking down the narrow cobblestone mews seeing moms pushing prams and men carrying a brolly. I love that the butchers still wear blue aprons and white hats and that a fruit and veg stall has been in someone's family for centuries.

So why don't I just live there, you ask. In my lottery dreams I do. I have a condo in Scottsdale, a townhouse in Walnut Creek and a cottage in Kent. But for now, I have to be satisfied with the fact that there will always be an England and that I will always be able to visit.

In the end, the U.S. Olympic team won 104 medals, the most by any country competing in the London 2012 Games. But well done, Britain, for being such a wonderful host and for winning the hearts of so many people around the world and especially mine.