

Around the World

An Anthology of Travel Writing
Collected by Harvard Book Store

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OF HIPBONES AND HOSTELS

by Sue Hertz

EVERY MORNING I walk through Kensington Gardens. The entrance is less than four blocks up Queen's Gate from the hostel where I stay with my travel writing students. I don't care if it's cold and raw and mist coats my glasses. January in London is like that. Arms swinging, I share the crisscrossed paths slicing through greens and woods with joggers and walkers and Burberry-clad cyclists, their briefcases secured on metal racks. I share the paths with Corgis and black labs named Eloise and Walter, their owners in knee-high wellies tossing balls and scolding when their hounds bolt from view. By the Round Pond, I share the path with ducks and swans and sleepy nannies pushing prams. By the bathhouse, I share the path with the Serpentine swimmers, gray-haired, white-haired, and occasionally youthful men and women, circling their arms to warm their muscles before they step into the winter chill of the Serpentine Lake. "Great for a hangover," one fellow says as he exits the water, shaking drops from his ears. Wet

suits are not allowed.

My husband likes to say that he's married to a woman "who must be exercised." He's not wrong. These morning jaunts, however, do more than rev the cardio; they connect me to daily London and the people who live in this complicated, ethnically diverse, culturally rich metropolis that has gripped my fascination since I was a college student studying abroad. Yet on this particular morning, a week into the January travel writing program, I am so flummoxed that I barely hear the thunder of scooter wheels on pavement as children in grey uniforms roll past en route to school.

How, I wonder, could the ten college students I've brought to England to write essays about place *not* love this city?

During my tours leading studying abroad programs in the United Kingdom, I've noticed that students go through three phases:

1) Jet-lagged but euphoric. They have made it! London! Look at the cabs! The Ferraris! Marble Arch! Pubs on every corner!

2) Crushing fatigue and displacement. The Tube map is confusing. The coins are heavy. The

beer is tepid. Hamburgers cost \$12.

3) Adjustment. With some sleep the Tube map grows clearer and they discover they can get from Earls Court to that Whitechapel Indian restaurant without changing lines. They learn to eat donor kebabs and steak pies. They learn to identify the octagonal twenty-pence and gold-flecked two-pound piece. And while they never learn to like ale at room temperature, they accept it.

Some travellers take longer to embrace the new, but I can't remember a student lingering in Stage 2 for more than a few days—until now. This January's travel writing crew seems to have skipped euphoria and headed straight into bleary-eyed intolerance, from which they haven't budged. Nina, a university administrator taking the course for a lark, wonders why she can't just order coffee with milk, why she has to say white coffee? She's mad that she had to wait a half hour for a tour bus, and her feet hurt. Too much walking. Leslie is angry that her airline lost her luggage and even though her mother said she could charge what she needed to get by until her suitcase arrived, she wants her clothes. Heather faces every morning with trepidation, past urban nightmares of an

unhappy winter in Boston freezing her will to venture out.

And the three guys. Two slept through the first mandatory meeting, and although all three made it to the Hop-On Hop-Off bus tour the next day, they refused to hop off. They sat on the top deck, earbuds in place playing music, not the audio tour. At the last stop, they finally descended the steps and walked through the folding doors into Victoria Station. Later, when asked what they saw from the top of the bus that intrigued them, called for them to return and investigate, they shrugged.

Most of us can look back and identify a moment at which everything changed, perhaps because of a decision we made or a decision that was made for us. For me, that moment was on Brompton Road, somewhere between Harrod's and the Bunch of Grapes pub, sometime after the Beatles' breakup and before gold-bejeweled Russians bought up Knightsbridge. I was twenty-years-old living with seventy-five other American twenty-year-olds in a curved brick building called Shield House on a side street not far from the Victoria and Albert Museum. On weekdays

we attended classes. On weeknights we roamed London, snagging discounted theatre tickets to *A Chorus Line* and Pinter plays or catching blues bands in dark, smoky clubs. On weekends we explored Great Britain, hopping on trains and busses to Cornwall and Devon, Edinburgh and the Lakes District, Oxford and Cambridge. We drank warm lager and hard cider and learned to order our tea "black." We inhaled McVities Digestives. We said "take away" instead of "to go" and "ta" instead of "thanks." We said "sorry" whenever we apologized. We had our hair cut at Vidal Sassoon's training school. And we walked. We walked from South Kensington to Hyde Park and Green Park and Trafalgar Square. We walked to the Portobello Market and Whitehall and Hammersmith. We were drunk with freedom and discovery.

On my walk down Brompton Road that October afternoon, fresh from a tour of St. Paul's Cathedral with plans for seeing *Jesus Christ Superstar* that night, I was struck by just how large the planet was, and how very little I'd experienced. And while I looked forward to my month long Christmas break travels on the Continent, I realized that a few days in Florence and Paris and Salzburg wouldn't satisfy my yearning to

know more, see more. Just before I turned left onto Edgerton Gardens where I would climb the stairs to Shield House, I concocted a plan to not go home when the semester ended in January as planned, but to stay. And travel. And work. Heady with the diesel fumes of the London busses, I charged back to my room and wrote my parents.

The first travel writing assignment of this January program is to investigate something the students saw on the bus tour. Shakespeare's Globe Theatre. Westminster Abbey. National Portrait Gallery. London School of Economics. In class that evening, Rob sits as still as stone, his arms, thick with muscles earned from hours at the gym, crossed against his chest. When asked what he found to write about, what aroused his curiosity, he explodes, "I saw everything I need to see from the top of the bus! I don't need to go to the Tower of London or Buckingham Palace or visit a museum. I hate museums!"

His classmates shift in their seats. No one speaks, the air pulsing with unease. Heather, blonde and pale, her round blue eyes wide with worry, looks from Rob to his two buddies and back to Rob. The two buddies stare at their feet.

Rob rests his chin on his chest.

Nina breaks the silence. "I hate museums, too," she says, slowly closing her notebook.

Deciding to explore Europe rather than complete junior year at my home university, was, perhaps, the first time I'd defied expectations. Good daughters, predictable daughters, finished college in four years. Good daughters, predictable daughters, didn't forge off to France and Greece without a plan. I didn't mean to cause my parents sleepless nights as they fretted about my safety, my lack of funds, the distance between us. But I couldn't deny the rush of confidence from choosing the path of most resistance. On that Brompton Road walk, I realized that I could make decisions based on what I—not my parents, or my friends, or my culture—thought best.

The second boost came from executing the decision. Prepared to journey solo, I was thrilled when Paula, one of my Shield House friends, tossed her plan to study in London for the spring and opted to join me instead. Who knows what would have happened if I'd been alone, how long I would have lasted, where I would have visited. What is clear is that together we thrived. We

worked petty jobs in London—Paula clerking at a travel agency and me scooping rum raisin ice cream at Baskin Robbins—and when the paid gigs we had hoped for in Cortina d'Ampezzo, the Italian ski resort, didn't gel, we wound our way from the Dolomites to Venice to Rome on less than \$4 a day. All it required was a steady diet of night trains, hostels, and lots of bread and fruit. Who cared that we couldn't sleep on our stomachs because our hipbones protruded too far into the mattress?

We learned to ask for what we wanted, and snagged jobs making beds in a small hotel in a village on the south coast of Crete. We stayed a month, swimming in the Mediterranean, dancing with the locals, joking with the locals, sharing Easter dinner with the locals. We learned to plot separate journeys and reunite over paella in Barcelona.

Together we faced illness and surly porters and hunger so keen that Spam sufficed as dinner. Together we learned resourcefulness.

Which is what I wish for my travel writing students to these decades later.

An aspiring sportswriter, Rob wants to visit

Wembley Stadium, perhaps catch a soccer match. I send him links to Wembley as well as to Arsenal and Chelsea and Fulham stadiums. No response. Instead, he visits the Natural History Museum, which is all of fifty feet from our hostel's front door. At the end of class, Rob and his chums trot three blocks to the Hoop & Toy, a pub next to the South Kensington Tube stop that they have frequented every night since arrival. And every night, Rob orders Budweiser.

In class, Nina jokes that she still doesn't understand the Tube and depends on her travel companion, the other non-traditional student (i.e., over thirty) on our trip, to direct the journey. When the classmate's agenda conflicts, Nina's face grows taut, her lips pursed. Nina admits that most days in London she dreams of a vacation by a kidney-shaped pool and tropical drinks with little umbrellas.

Heather doesn't mind the clouds, the damp, and has a long list of places to visit. But over a week into our stay, she still seeks out Sandy, a veteran traveller who has studied in Senegal and France. With Sandy, a new felt hat perched jauntily on her head, in the lead, Heather cheerfully follows down Cromwell Road and off to the Tate Modern.

She has yet to leave the hostel on her own.

On Friday, we travel by train to Cambridge. Each student has a separate assignment, a prompt to observe and research a specific place. Happy that her suitcase has arrived and she's swathed in familiar jeans, Leslie bubbles about the sites she'd like to see—King's Chapel, Trinity College, the river punts. Her face flushed, she asks two other students about their assignments and suggests that they check things out together. Rob and his buddies sleep. The English countryside—the rolling hills dotted with sheep, the clusters of brick townhouses, the village centers—flows by unnoticed.

My first study abroad stint was in Cambridge, a six-week summer program based in one of the oldest of the university's thirty-one colleges. I adore everything about the city—from the narrow cobblestone streets to the thousand-year-old churches to the River Cam that meanders through the Backs. I love the architectural grandeur, the turrets and towers and gargoyles. I love the quiet quads of grass so green your eyes hurt, the market that dates back to the Saxons. I love the bikes that clog the alleys and byways. I want these students

to find the enchantment.

"This is beautiful," Rob says, ogling the spires and turrets of King's College. I am hopeful. At last. Perhaps London is too big for this man/boy from New England. He and his chums head off to Clare College's gardens, Rob's spot to report and observe.

Within two hours, the three are back on the train to London.

It is Saturday. All seven of the women in the program have accepted my invitation to escort them to Camden Market. We'll take the Tube. This will require a change at Leicester Square, I explain to the group, making eye contact with Nina. The trip is successful; we don't lose anyone. We leave the Camden station, walk towards the market, a mosaic of vendors for as far as the eye can see—rows and rows of booths, covered and open, selling used clothing and new clothing, Moroccan leather bags, silver jewelry, postcards, antique clocks, and teapots. And so much food! Thai noodles, Indonesian noodles, Mexican fajitas. Nina grimaces when the drizzle starts but calms when she sees indoor options. We separate and I watch them meander down the aisles, the

younger students picking up t-shirts and silver belt buckles, the two older women marching with purpose.

I close my eyes. Perhaps this is the day that they will discover that travelling brings not only purchases, but also surprise. Perhaps Nina will learn to find the Tube route to get back to the hostel. Perhaps Heather will forge ahead on her own. Perhaps they will find something so delightful, so intriguing, that they will ignore that inner brake.

The three guys have overslept. The rest of us wait in the lobby, grasping our snacks and drinks, ready to meet the bus that will take us to Warwick Castle, Stratford, Oxford and through the Cotswolds. We call the guys. We text the guys. Two of the young women knock on their door. Leslie is almost in tears. "Will the bus leave without us?" she asks. I send them ahead. When the guys emerge, tussle-haired and unwashed, I wait for an apology. Instead, they raise their chins in defiance.

I sit alone on the bus, fuming and staring out the window as we zip down the M-40. I don't expect that these students will embrace all things

London, that they will wake each day with a to-do list too long to accomplish. I don't expect that any of them will sacrifice a semester to herd sheep on a Greek Island. But I do expect that they will find some magic in these foreign streets, that they will put down their iPhones and stop Skyping home long enough perhaps to note the graceful Georgian architecture, the blend of black, brown, and white faces that dot every street and shop. I hope that they will try the cuisines—Ethiopian, Indonesian, Caribbean—that they can't taste in their college town. I hope that they will be blown away by catching David Tennant play Hamlet or by visiting a mosque or the Courtauld Gallery's Impressionist collection. I wish that they would sit in the pews of St. Martins-in-the-Fields and swoon over a lunchtime Vivaldi concert. And even if they loathe art and theatre and classical music, I hope that they find inspiration touring the Beatles hot spots or riding a rental bike around Hyde Park. I hope that *something* ignites their curiosity.

It isn't Warwick Castle—too touristy with its wax figures of dukes and duchesses—or Shakespeare's birthplace—too tired and small—or even Oxford, which is sinking into darkness by

our arrival. The bus tour is a bust.

On our last night, the whole crew dines together at Rocco's, an Italian restaurant across from our neighborhood Caffè Nero. We order our wine, our pasta, our antipastos. I chat with Nina about the grandson she can't wait to hug. Most of her classmates are also eager to get home and connect with boyfriends and girlfriends and roommates, to sleep in their own beds. I wonder if this three-week course is too short to build confidence or the yearning to discover the world. I wonder whether my belief in the power of navigating the unknown is naïve.

And then I listen to the chatter as they reminisce. Nina boasts about not one but two jackets she purchased at outdoor markets, and also about how much she enjoyed a play at a Notting Hill theatre. Leslie describes her visit to the Harry Potter movie set, just outside of London. Sandy observed a session of Parliament and says, spreading her arms, "I was this close to David Cameron!" Others tell stories of the Camden town pub that Amy Winehouse frequented and the miles logged each day as they toured Chelsea and Holland Park, Brick Lane and Sloane Square.

Heather sits quietly, until someone reminds her of the Tube fiasco. She laughs and then acts out her panic when the Tube door closed before she could disembark at South Kensington. She was on the train and her friends were on the platform. As the train inched forward, she was, for the first time since she arrived on this island, alone. Her heart beat faster. Sweat pooled in her armpits. She got out at the next stop, Gloucester Road, and, instantly, she calmed. She knew this tube stop well; it was close to the hostel as the South Ken station and frequented as often. She emerged into the London night, damp and misty but as familiar as snow squalls at home. She straightened her collar, adjusted her purse strap, and headed back to the hostel. She had, she says, reclaimed the city.

Perhaps, I think as I watch the waiter carry the steaming mushroom tortellini and Pizza Primavera to the table, this trip has changed some of them after all—just a tad. Perhaps traveling is like parenting; the rewards are in the little moments, not the epiphanies. Before I get too smug, though, too pleased, I wait to hear from Rob and his buddies, predicting that they'll share the same old stories of the Hoop & Toy or their one night in a Picadilly club.

But I am wrong.

They talk about their visit to the Sherlock Holmes Museum on Baker Street. "It wasn't bad," Rob says. The trip wasn't Rob's idea—he's not a big fan of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's classic—but he did it because Buddy One has read all the books and watched all the movies. It isn't clear which of them figured out the route but they did it. They plotted an outing. They changed Tube lines. They travelled out of their comfort zone.

It's a start. I raise my glass for a final toast.