

GOING PLACES #2

JOHN COONEY



LONDON

POP, POMP & PAGEANTRY



Seconds before the doors hissed shut and the train moved out, a couple of scruffy buskers lunged into our carriage. One had a strange mouth-organ thingy, plus a beat-up set of bongos which he gripped between his knobby knees. The other had a tired guitar. And as we rumbled out of the station into a long, dark tunnel, they started singing: *"If you can't have a shave in the toilets where can you have a shave ...?"*

We were on the other side of the world. On the London Underground. We'd been crisscrossing this amazing city, popping up here and there (like rabbits out of our holes) at places that sounded strangely familiar: Trafalgar Square ... Kings Cross ... Liverpool Street ... Paddington ...

Three days earlier, a black London cab had carted us and our luggage through rush-hour streets from the airport to our hotel. "See that apartment over there ..." The cabby pointed to an elegant mansion. "An Arab oil sheik paid 100,000 pounds for just one small room – so his wife could keep her shoe collection in London!"

Next morning after breakfast, we abandoned our hotel and went walking in the rain – past ritzy shops to the nearest Underground. There we rode a down-escalator into the bowels of the earth, following the crowds through a ticket-machine and squashing aboard a standing-room-only train bound for the infamous Tower of London.

This massive fortress once stood guard over the city and its river-access. And behind those five-metre-thick walls, England's spies, traitors and plotters were variously tortured, smothered and beheaded.

I couldn't wait to tour the ghastly place and get shivers up and down my spine. But my wife was more interested in the spectacular Crown Jewels, locked safely away inside.

Thousands of years before New Zealand opened for business, people were running around England like mad things – planning cities, thatching cottages, sailing ships, fighting wars. And in olde-worlde London (with its

pop, pomp and pageantry) there's historical stuff in every direction.

Which is what I'd come to see – right? I hadn't flown halfway round the world to go shopping. But, ah, the lady I love LOVES shopping. And, come Saturday, she led me on a Harrods-hunt ...

The most fashionable shop in the world is huge – a lot huge-er than the little grocery store that Henry Charles Har-



rod started out with in 1849. And yes, I admit it: the famous Food Halls were well worth a wander through. If it was poultry or game you wanted, you could choose a grouse, hare, partridge, pheasant, snipe, veal, wild duck, venison, guinea fowl, pigeon – or one of the naked turkeys that hung from hooks above the counter.

Harrods was also the first shop to install an escalator. And its Victorian customers were so overcome after riding the 'moving staircase' that attendants at the top administered brandy to gentlemen and smelling salts to the ladies.

Very right and proper and British!

Harrods boasts that it can supply anything to anyone anywhere. And, through the years, it's obliged by sending an



elephant to Ronald Reagan, gooseberries to Saudi Arabia, and a skunk to the ex-wife of an upset American.

I was tempted to order an elephant, but we opted instead for a 35-pence postcard – which the uniformed girl obligingly put inside a great big Harrods' carry-bag (which my Kiwi girl promptly hung on her arm like a sign: "Guess where we've been!").

In search of something greener, we explored the banks of the Thames ... photo-ed each other in the arms of a massive black Egyptian sphinx ... followed a bedraggled lady tramp and her little dog as she searched through rubbish bins and stacked her findings in a stolen supermarket trolley ... and caught an Underground train for the largest open space in central London: Kensington Gardens and the never-ending Hyde Park.

Duels of honour used to be fought around here somewhere – with offended English gentry poking holes in (or taking pot-shots at) each other.

We'd promised ourselves something more civilised – a night at the West End – and bought tickets for a toe-tappin', hand-clappin' musical comedy.

London's famous theatre district bristles with cafes, bars, craft stalls and street entertainers. Plus more place-names that ring bells: Leicester Square, Covent Garden and Piccadilly Circus – named after a 17th century dressmaker who created a frilly collar called a 'piccadil'.

Our tired feet were, by now, wanting a month off for good behaviour – but we told them to shut up and take us to the remaining gotta-see landmarks on our list.



We browsed around the magnificent St Paul's Cathedral, with its magnificent 700-tonne dome – built by Christopher Wren after the Great Fire of London in 1666 (when two thirds of the city was fried to a crisp).

We leered through the fence at Buckingham Palace, but the Queen wasn't home (she must've forgotten we were coming). However, some soldiers in red coats and horses in white socks Changed-the-Guard just for us.

We walked down the aisle in glittering Westminster Abbey, where every king or queen for the past 900 years was crowned. And we sipped coffee in the shadow of Big Ben – which, it turns out, is the name not of the famous clock but of the ginormous bell that strikes the hours for running-late Londoners.

The bell was tolling for us, too. And we ate our final dinner in an English pub. Was it *The Slug & Lettuce ... The Drum & Monkey ... The Froth & Elbow ... The Headless Woman ... or The Frog & Nightgown ...*? I can't recall. There are 1500 pubs in London, tucked into nooks and crannies down crowded city streets.

One bears the curious name: *I Am The Only Running Footman*. (There's gotta be a story behind that!)

Anyway, our story, for now, was done. We'd fallen in love with London. And someday, somehow, we would be back! ❁

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