

Alden's Trip to London

9/16/03, MONDAY, FAIRFAX, VIRGINIA

We board Virgin Airlines Flight 22 to London Heathrow airport. The interior of the plane screams at us as all the chairs are either fire engine red or Grimace purple. The crew is British. It's the first time that I've heard the British accent from more than one person at a time. The seats are kind of tight in the economy cabin, but the entertainment system at every seat makes up for that. At 8:00 p.m., we're still on the tarmac. Apparently, inclement weather has moved into the region and it has delayed our flight considerably. Several rows in front of Steve and me, an Indian woman has become agitated because she is not being allowed to use the restroom. Several rows behind us, a British man (hereafter, the Sarcastic Brit) begins making caustic remarks about Virgin Atlantic Airways and its service. I can tell that he's going to be trouble. An hour and a half later than scheduled, we finally depart Dulles airport.

9/17/03, TUESDAY, ABOVE THE SKIES OF THE UK, 6:00 a.m.

The sarcastic Brit is still plainly upset about the delay. He has been making frequent, loud, sarcastic comments throughout the flight so that everyone in the cabin has a chance to hear his opinions. People have been complaining to the flight staff, and one passenger reports it to the flight crew. They approach him and ask him to behave, he responds by threatening to cut their heads off. Apparently, this is an act of terrorism, because as we descend into Heathrow, the pilot warns us to expect a delay to allow British police onto the flight when we land. This displeases the sarcastic Brit and he launches into tirades about what is wrong with Britain and how he regrets all the service he has done for Britain. He adds that if he sees a "cop on this plane, I'll be through with Britain forever!" He carries on as such during the entire descent into London, and while the plane taxis into the terminal. The sarcastic Brit is only quited when he is in handcuffs and an irritated British policeman tells him, "Oh shut up already."

9:00 a.m. Planes, Trains, and Automobiles

After Steve and I claim our luggage, we reach a crossroads as how to get to our hotel which is in Central London (Heathrow is to the west of the city). After some heated debate, we decide to take London's subway system (hereafter, the tube). However, 9:00 a.m. on a workday morning seems to be an unfavorable time to access the tube with a bunch of luggage. But we survive and navigate our way to our tube stop at Tottenham Court Road.

Box 1: Alden's Observations: The Tube

The tube is London's subway. It is also the world's oldest subway. As a frequent commuter on Washington's rather new subway system, I found the following observations regarding the tube rather interesting:

1. The escalators on the world's oldest subway station seem to almost always be in working order. Ditto the elevators.
2. There is no air conditioning in the system. If you are on a train and want ventilation, you need to open a window at either end of the car you are riding on. Stuff flies in when the train is above ground, but this does not seem to bother the Brits.
3. Darwinian rules dictate boarding and disembarking trains, only the strong or uniquely able survive. Whether the person is young or old, or male or female; pushing, shoving, and throwing oneself into a group of people already aboard are all perfectly acceptable methods of boarding and getting off of cars.
4. Your baggage becomes part of the public good if it increases the comfort of another rider. Thus my luggage became a bench, a reading desk, and a hospital bench (someone injected themselves with something leaning against my luggage) all on my ride to my hotel.

We reach the tube station our hotel is closest to, Tottenham Square Road Station, and exit. Our hotel, the St. Giles, is just two blocks from the station entrance. It's a modest hotel, but what it lacks in luxury, it more than makes up for in location. It's in a prime spot, right at the corner of Tottenham Square Road/Charing Cross Road, and Oxford Street. We check in, put our bags into our rooms and head off to Oxford Street to do some shopping.

4:00 p.m., Shopped 'til I Dropped

It's 4:00 p.m. in London and my feet are killing me. Steve and I have just walked up Oxford Street, and there seems to be a million stores. Many of the stores are redundant, but there's still a lot to look at, from high fashion to everyday British goods. Going in and out of stores is a time-intensive activity and it takes a toll on your feet, but it's worth the time if you like to shop (like I do). We head down the other side of Oxford Street and at 7:00 p.m., go to a British chain restaurant called Garfunkles. We return to the hotel room after dinner and go to bed, feet aching.

Box 2: Alden's Observations: British Food and Restaurants in London

British food is rather bland. From my experiences in London, the way to experience British food is to steer away from chain restaurants like Garfunkles, and go to pubs recommended by Brits. Here are some other findings:

5. English bacon is thick almost like Canadian bacon. And they don't ask you how you want your eggs cooked, they'll just do them over easy.
6. If you want regular/tap water, you need to request a glass of "still" water. Sometimes they'll bring you out a bottle of Evian anyway.
7. Diet Coke is sometimes known as Coke Light.
8. Service in England is horrible. It is generally inattentive, slow, and sometimes, rude. And forget about free refills on Coke Light.

9/17/03, WEDNESDAY, GREEN PARK, LONDON, 9:20 a.m.

Steve and I are hoofing it across Green Park to get to the Buckingham Palace tour ticket office. Luckily, we make it at 9:25, and are surprisingly the only ones in line. The attendant tells us that if we hurry we can make the 9:30 tour. We quickly run around three quarters of the perimeter of the palace to the tour's entry point. The security is heavy, but courteous. We are given headsets and are told it is a self-guided tour, with points of interest having individual audio descriptions.

The palace is only open for two months of the year, August and September, when the Queen goes to the north for her summer holiday. During these two months, tourists are allowed to visit her staterooms, rooms used by the Queen to greet dignitaries in and to throw soirees in. As I follow the tour, I am in awe by the luxury of the staterooms. Each room seems to be gilded and all of the furniture covered in fine silks and other precious substances. While the size of Buckingham palace does not awe, the interiors do. The tour concludes at a balcony outside of the Queen's music room and we walk through the royal gardens back towards Green Park.



Buckingham Palace as seen from Green Park

2:00 p.m. Big Bad Bus

After exiting Buckingham palace, Steve and I were fortunate enough to catch a double-decker bus tour as it leaves from its first stop at Green Park. As we careen through the streets of London, we get to see all of the most famous sights of London in a three hours. We cross the river Thames several times to access sights on the North and South bank. The views are spectacular as we cross to the South bank and see the Millennium Eye dawning over the river Thames. When we return to the North bank over the London Bridge, we see the magician David Blaine in his Plexiglas box, suspended over the river. The tour also allows us to purchase discounted tickets to various points of interest. So we purchase tickets to Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum.



Horse Guards at Buckingham Palace as seen from the Big Bus Tour

4:30 p.m. You've Got Wax in Your Ear

The first level of Madame Tussaud's is dedicated to wax versions of Hollywood Celebrities. It is on the first floor that you can find likenesses of the Sylvester Stallone, Julia Roberts, the Rock, amongst others. Walking up one floor takes us to historical wax figures. There is a strange sprinkling of randomly selected historical figures, including Roman gladiators, Ghandi, and George W. Bush. Even stranger still is that a lot of German tourists want to take a picture next to the Hitler figure. Climbing yet another stair case, we encounter the next exhibition, "Serial Killers." This is more disappointing than it is scary. There are only three display cases, and they are not particularly frightening. Finally, we get on a roller coaster type ride on the fourth floor to tour the "Spirit of London" exhibition. As bad as the "Serial Killer" exhibition, the spirit exhibition was worse. It was definitely more flash that substance. Feeling as if we had just wasted two hours, we leave Madame Tussauds for Knightsbridge and Harrod's.

Box 3: Alden's Observations: British Celebrities

For such a small country, England has lots of celebrities. England also has many publications and television programming following the everyday lives of these celebrities. They idolize television stars, soccer and rugby players, and musicians. My experience at Madame Tussaud's yielded the following observations:

9. The former Spice Girls are still cool, especially Posh Spice (Victoria Adams) because she is married to David Beckham.
10. Don't make fun of David Beckham's voice.

9/18/03, THURSDAY, THE BRITISH MUSEUM, 10:30 a.m.

So many great exhibits are displayed in one building, the British museum. We looked at Egyptian sarcophagi, busts from Rome, Budha statues from the Far East, and a plethora of other antiquities and anthropological treasures. The exhibits were simply fantastic. After the British museum, Steve and I head out for lunch at Leicester Square. While we are at Leicester Square, we purchase half-priced theater tickets and then we head out to Westminster Abbey.



Steve looks at an exhibit on Egyptian cat statues at the British Museum

3:00 p.m. Westminster Abbey

I consider Westminster Abbey the low part of the trip thus far. The exhibit is macabre, as most of what is on display are graves. Furthermore, half of the graves are inscribed Latin. And my feet hurt—a lot. I couldn't wait to get back to the hotel, get some rest, and head out to Aldwych to go to the theater that night.

8:30 p.m. I'm Gonna Live Forever

Steve and I are sitting in row J, seats 6 and 7, in the Aldwych Theater. It's a smallish theater located to the south of the Covent Garden part of London. Covent Garden is known as "theater land" for the myriad musicals and plays based there. We have come to see the musical "Fame" which is loosely based on the movie of the same name. The cast of the musical is largely young and unknown, but it is still pretty good. There are a bunch of Germans sitting all around us. I wonder if they know enough English to understand what the cast is saying.

9/19/03; FRIDAY, VICTORIA COACH STATION; 9:00 a.m.

We are boarding a coach for a day tour of Stonehenge and Bath. There are thirty of us who are going to the west of England. The tour guide, Ricky, is very insightful and entertaining. He is the best guide we have had thus far, and as we pass by interesting sights in London, he has lots to say. Stonehenge is located in the middle of Salisbury Plain in Wilshire and it takes about an hour to get to. The site has its perimeter roped off, so we couldn't actually touch the actual stones. However, getting that close to the real stones was still pretty neat. The weather was also quite cool, which made touring outdoors pretty comfortable.

After we leave Stonehenge, we head further west to the city of Bath. Bath was founded by the Romans, who built a settlement around the city's natural hot springs. The whole city has a yellowish-beige tint, as many of the buildings are constructed from the same kind of stone from the hills that surround Bath. We tour the original Roman baths, which are quite extensive. It is amazing to see much of the original Roman architecture is still in place. Ricky, our tour guide, also advised us that the restaurant adjacent to the Roman Baths offers a glass of the bath water for consumption. He always consumes a glass when he comes to Bath, and urges us to do so also, but warns us it has a unique taste. Although Steve or I choose not to

consume the water from the Roman baths, an Australian kid who did said it tasted like the four letter word for excrement.

We leave Bath at four for our three-hour drive back to London.

9/21/03, SUNDAY, REGENT STREET, NOON

I've spent the last two days shopping. I've been up and down Regent Street, back to Harrods in Knightsbridge, and back to Oxford Street. Steve and I have also done a little shopping in the Covent Garden street market and Kensington.



Statue of some horses in Picadilly Circus

Box 4: Alden's Observations: British Money

British money is unusual. The basic unit, the Pound, is a coin. Two pounds is another coin. The sub-units are pence. Pence come in coin denominations of one pence, two pence, five pence, ten pence, twenty pence, and fifty pence. The coins are all sorts of sizes, metals, and shapes. I often found myself standing at the cash registers flipping over coins so I can see how much they are worth, much to the consternation of the other shoppers in line behind me.

Paper money also comes in different sizes. And lots of colors. There is once constant to all the money though, and that is the portrait of Queen Elizabeth II. It's on everything.

9/22/03, MONDAY, SKIES OVER FAIRFAX, VIRGINIA, 4:00 p.m.

The return trip has been blissfully uneventful. There are no crazy people on the way back, thank goodness.