

British Lifestyles

• Jenny Brown in Brighton



No You Can't!

No you can't – have a sachet of ketchup for free to go on your chips.

That's 10p extra

No you can't – have ice in your vodka and tonic. The whole town's out of ice.

No you can't - expect to EVER get to your destination on time via British Rail

No you can't – expect anyone to bag your groceries in the supermarket

No you can't – expect air conditioning in an 90F + working environment

No you can't – open a bank account without showing us a million pieces of ID, and a 10 year credit check and personalised letter from your bank manager back home, and anyone who's ever known you.

No you can't – expect anyone to ever go out of their way to be helpful, give you a smile, or say 'have a nice day!'.

This is England 2003

From my cozy living room in Vancouver, Canada, I often sit and reminisce about the good old days of England trips gone by. The fabulous food, the lovely shops, the pub atmosphere and the gentle countryside. But in my fantasy world, I somehow never remember the difficulties I encounter each and every time I come over. So gung-ho am I to return once again to experience an exciting different culture, I forget the reality that living in England is in fact, usually going to be hell.

My family has warned me many a time that living somewhere is a lot different than holidaying there. On a two-week trip, one might readily laugh off the utter rudeness of a customer service clerk, and gaily shout 'When in Rome!'. One would fight the temptation to explain to the stony faced bus driver that in Canada, you couldn't get away with that kind of treatment, after he says "Jesus Christ" when you plonk down small change on his silver counter. You are comforted by the knowledge that you'll soon be back home, being fussed over by smiling waiters, sales clerks, bank tellers and just about anyone you meet on the street.

Andy

After a lovely 2-week holiday in Hampshire with my folks, I set off for Brighton - city by the sea, gay capital, funky lanes and cool cafes. I wandered the neighbourhood I grew up in, breathed in the air, and prepared myself for the next leg of the journey. The exciting task of finding a job and moving in to a room I stayed at 2 years ago. My friend's friend's ex-husband owned the house. His name was Andy and they had since divorced and yes I knew he liked to drink, but 'no problem', I thought. Things went swimmingly there last time. Aside from having my food eaten and milk drank constantly. Aside from getting roped into babysitting their 3 year old when Andy wanted to nip down to the local for half an hour, that always turned into 2 hours. And to top it all off, I was down to my last few pounds, and I went and broke and had to replace their £30 kettle. (Who in their right mind buys a £30 kettle? That's \$70 for a bloody kettle!).

I guess the first sign that things may go awry, was when I arrived on the doorstep at our arranged time and the lights were off, and no one was home. My dad, who was

anxious to get going on his hour and a half drive home at 9:00 at night, frowned. I got hold of Andy via mobile (I could barely hear him over the noise of the bar he was in), and he apologised profusely and promised to be there in 5 minutes. Half an hour later he showed up. More black looks from dad. He gave me a huge hug like we were long lost pals. Up in the attic room dad surveyed the bare bed, and thin blind on the window and asked me if I thought I 'd be ok. 'Yeah, he's ok' I said bravely. We both looked at the door with broken latch, and no lock. With much reluctance, dad left, and I did some unpacking and finally lay on the double bed and covered myself with the single quilt Andy had found.

As I predicted, I barely saw Andy in the following weeks. My food and milk were safe, there was a crap kettle that sometimes worked and the only sign he lived there was his slamming doors and walking into things any time between 1 and 3 in the morning. But it suddenly dawned on me that there I was, alone in a house with a drunken man I barely knew. My friends told me not to worry. But one night, I finally obeyed the nagging voice in my head and took a pair of scissors to bed.

At at 5:00 that morning there was a rattling at my door. With heart pounding I lurched upright in bed, grabbed for the scissors and felt nothing but the cool smooth sheets. I must have knocked them between the planks of the box spring and in the pitch black I could see nothing. I frantically pulled out my one earplug. Andy stepped into the room. "Oh hi jenny". He said, sounding very surprised to see me there. "How are you doing?"

"What?" I said still fumbling round the bed. "Sorry" he said. "OK, see you in the morning."

I sat frozen for several minutes, and listened intently to his stumblings and door slammings downstairs. I realised my friends were right. There was no reason for my paranoia. He was just a harmless drunk, who'd wandered into the wrong room. Had I in fact found my scissors and gone into attack mode, I could have been as good as Tony Martin who was jailed for shooting and killing a burglar. This isn't the States. This isn't 'Sleeping with the Enemy', I realised, and I'm not Julia Roberts. In England, it seems, the laws are reversed. Self defence or not, I'd be the one doing time.

Thankfully, it gave me the leverage I wanted to get out of there with short notice. Having broken the washing machine, I was looking for a speedy exit, before he discovered it and came looking for repair money.

Temping



I was offered a job at the Substance Misuse Service. Such a PC and clinical sounding place, bringing to mind visions of white halls, crisply dressed nurses and rows of single beds. It turned out to be a crumbling, decrepit building with a gauntlet of scabby, skeletal heroin addicts loitering outside.

I manoeuvred myself through, and once inside the office manager led me up some squeaky stairs with a sticky banister (that I kept forgetting to not touch.) The office was tiny and crammed with four people; had no air-conditioning and an obnoxious radio station blaring R&B all day long. The staff seemed to have been there, done that, and gotten the paint splattered T-shirt and threadbare leggings.

In charge of the nurses (mostly male) was a modern day nurse Hatchett called Michael. Clad in shirts of lemon and pink pastel, this bitchy gay Team Leader spoke the queen's English, and had no time for strung out patients who missed appointments or became violent. He dished out the methadone gladly and encouraged them to leave with haste. I set about the routine of typing up the notes on each patient, horrified by what I read about the addict's daily behaviour. They spent between £20-100 a day on heroin or crack, shooting up several times a day. Most of them hadn't worked for years, so shoplifting, prostitution or the whole of their welfare cheque funded their habit. Half of them had no address, and described sleeping in

alleys, churches, parks or stairwells. There was nearly always a history of child abuse, and what children some of them had were in foster homes. They had been in and out of prison and mental institutions. The hardest to read about was the pregnant women who still used daily. Although they stated that they were sick and tired of their lifestyle, most of them had been on the program numerous times, some relapsing the day after treatment was finished. Deaths caused by accidental or deliberate overdose are frequent. Considering that Methadone is supposedly more addictive than heroin, the rate of failure and the depressing working conditions, it made me wonder the point of offering such a service at all.

The average shelf life of the staff was 2 years. Their salaries aren't above the average nurse's wage and the secretaries were earning £7.19/hr (which is slightly higher than the average secretary's wage) My job was extended and ended up lasting a month. As the weeks went by, I also developed a thicker skin, and eventually nothing I read was shocking. But unlike the rest, that seemed happy to continue working there, I breathed a sigh of relief the day I walked out. I didn't come to England to save the walking wounded. After a month of toiling in depressing conditions, it was time to let off steam, and to celebrate in the best way I know how shopping.

Fashion

I must be getting old.



I couldn't wait to get my fashion fix at Top Shop, one of my all time favourite chains for trends on the cutting edge. Imagine my horror when I waltzed into the teen packed shop and was greeted by a dummy dressed in electric blue leggings (circa 1983) an off the shoulder flashdance sweater, a thin, low slung belt, legwarmers and flat pointy shoes! Was this all a dream, had I suddenly leapt back in time? The only thing that kept me from freaking out totally was hearing the familiar blare of Beyonce arpeggio-ing her way through her latest #1 on the sound system (actually that was equally as obnoxious).

How did it go so horribly wrong? I turn my back for 2 years, and suddenly the designers have taken complete liberties with fashion history's tackiest era. (I say that now, but at the time I thought it was really cool). I mean, come on people, have we really just run out of ideas?

I remember last time I was here how I loved the square toed, clumpy-heeled shoes, the thick zip up cardigans, the cool below the knee skirts, the sparkly jewellery. I had expected to something slightly different or better, but at least something new! I looked round bewildered. Just more ripped up sweaters, thin dangly earrings, flashes of neon. I fingered a few price tags. Certainly not 80's prices. £28 for a pair of trousers, £20 for a T-shirt, £30 for a bomber jacket. I walked over to the shoe display and picked up a pair of bright yellow flats with bows and polka dots. I gazed at them in my hand and cringed at the memory of me at 8 years old, begging my step mum to buy me a pair of pointy shoes, and her refusing, saying they would damage my feet. I didn't care. The only thing that mattered was looking good. Who cared if I could barely walk. Who cared if I wore micro minis and a boob tube (with a flat chest) in the middle of winter, I would look fabulous, and just like all my girlfriends who were dressed identically.

So I guess I won't be going back this time and dazzling my friends with my latest haute couture purchases. I guess I'll have to stick with Canadian fashion that will be months behind England's trends. I have plenty of 'basics' to choose from in my wardrobe back home and I refuse to throw out my clumpy wedgies and thick zip up cardies. And it's comforting to know that though it may not be as cutting edge, you can get away with wearing the same items for several years, before there's a major change. I guess when the style of your childhood is suddenly at the forefront of

fashion and you are gagging at the tackiness of it, it's a sure sign that old age has set in.

British Rail



No bitching about England would be complete without mentioning British Rail – the epitome of bad English customer service. The service that's famous for delaying or cancelling trains for a variety of sometimes even contradictory reasons, at whim. Some include:

1. A leaf on the track
2. Strong winds
3. The onset of rain
4. Too hot
5. Too cold
6. Signalling malfunction
7. Awaiting another piece of train
8. A broken down train
9. And my favourite one of all – waiting for a driver.

Visions spring to mind of a man finishing up a pint down at the pub in his own sweet time, and then ambling off to the station to start his shift. Meanwhile, everyone's sitting or pacing, fuming and looking at their watches every minute hoping in vain that they might still catch their connecting train, and not have to add another hour and a half onto their journey if they miss it, and have to transfer another 4 times.

That's if they can be bothered giving you a reason at all. Half the time they just keep you sitting there in silence punctuated by a few revs of the engine that make you think, you're about to start going somewhere, but you never actually do.

I went for a week arriving at Three Bridges in time to catch a scheduled train to Brighton that just never appeared, the whole week. No explanation. I even asked someone who worked there once if they knew why, and they didn't. You're just expected to sit and wait for the next one and that was usually delayed. I have sat on an immobile train numerous times in a silent rage, jumping up every few moments to look out the window at a red faced platform man, marching up and down looking confused, and irritated by anyone asking them a question. I have noticed that the people around me don't seem surprised to sit motionless for 20 minutes at a time, giving only the occasional sigh. I hear the passive aggressive crack of newspapers, see frantic silent texting and furrowed brows, but no angry swearing, no emotional outbursts at all.

It makes me wonder, as I gaze down at my £17 return ticket from Brighton to Lymington Town (which includes 1/3 off because of my £20 network card), what exactly are the exorbitant prices we pay going towards anyway? Staff wages? Track maintenance? Toilet cleaning services? A PA system that's audible? A reliable food trolley service on long hauls?

Compare it to Vancouver. You pay \$2 that lasts about an hour and a half. You can transfer to any train, any bus for that entire time, that will take you as far as it goes within that zone, and there's actually friendly staff dressed in blue hiking jackets that are happy to answer any questions, assist old ladies and push wheelchairs.

My advice is, if you're planning a journey and you look up www.britishrail.com and punch in your travel times, or phone a helpful customer service person, the safest bet is to tack on another hour or two, and pack a sandwich. Don't tell anyone to wait up for you, hold dinner, or bake a cake, because there's no guarantee you'll be arriving in time for anything, any time soon.

Although I'm anxious to get back to the comforts of home, I'm sure I'll feel the same culture shock that I did here after being away for three months. I might feel myself

ping for the atmosphere of the ancient pubs and warm beer as I sit in the pristine bars back hope with the ice-cold aircon and faux brass rails. My hope is that the troubled times will fade from my memory and I'll find my way back to the fantasy of England as a quaint and quirky country I once used to visit.

© Jenny Brown August 18th 2003