

Postcard from London: Caught off Guard

By Wesley Trobaugh



The first time I went to London, I was 17 years old and it was a school trip. It was the first time I had stepped on anything other than North American soil. It didn't matter what there was, who there was or what I did; it was Europe and that's all that was important. It was London, the land of *Are You Being Served?* and *Mary Poppins* and everyone's favourite Cockney Dick Van Dyke... As the bus travelled on the left side of the road from Gatwick to Queen's Gate, I imagined Hyacinth Bucket would step out at any moment with a quaint British hello and invite us over for tea and scones. The hotel was uber-British, even the smell, our guide had just the accent we were expecting, and at the sound of "mind the gap," we rejoiced because we were in *London*, home of the *Queen* and the *Queen's* English.

This time I loved London just as much, but for very different reasons. It was not the quaint grove of Britishness I remembered but an almost perfect blend of everything I love in a city.

The first thing I was thrilled to see was my language. The effect that seeing and hearing your own language (even if mine is not the *Queen's* English) again has on you is amazing. You don't have to think about what you're going to say; it just comes out. You read signs without even thinking. I know Spanish. I know Basque. But they're not *my* languages. I imagine this happens to most people.

Another thing I was happy to see was the vast multiculturalism a place like London has to offer. There were people from every country, every city, every neighbourhood in the world and nobody cared. Nobody looked at us. Nobody said "Look, they're Spanish," or "He's American." They don't have names for us like "guiris." Everyone went about their business in their own world. It's not being cold; if I had a question, people were always helpful in answering it. They simply leave you alone if you don't need contact with them.

A true breath of fresh air was the silence on public transport. There was no chattering, no music on trains, just the sound of the pages of newspapers and books being turned. The only people you could hear were the Italian- and Spanish-speakers. It must be genetic.

I could go on for hours and, of course, London does have its flaws, but I will close with my final observation, perhaps the one that intrigued me most.

I had never seen the changing of the guard. I did not know what to expect. I had no idea what they would do. Perhaps the guards will just change places and go on with their duties. Perhaps there will be fanfares and soldiers and gunshots and Her Majesty will step out and wave to the sunstroke-affected crowds. It was neither, but a little of both. There was a parade of sorts and then some music by a band. I didn't recognise any of the songs so I didn't pay much attention. I was innocently standing on tiptoes trying to see *something*. They did carry off one poor band member who had fainted, which, so far, had been the most interesting event of the morning. Then suddenly I heard a familiar tune. I was caught completely "off-guard." Ethel Merman. There's NO business like SHOW business like NO business I knoooooow... What? This is Buckingham Palace. Where is the pomp and circumstance? Show business? I had to listen further. Show tunes! Yippee! Absolutely the wrong place and time for them but who doesn't love a show tune? But what broke the straw on the camel's back was a *West Side Story* selection. Is Buckingham Palace really the place to play "I like to be in America, okay by me in America?" What ever happened to God save the Queen and rule Britannia and those feet in ancient times and all that jazz? Show business sells, I suppose. Pomp, apparently does not.

Pomp or no pomp, London, I'll be back.