

TRAVEL

Couple has fond memories of honeymoon in England

BY PAM HOUGHTON
SPECIAL WRITER

England - narrow roads, bad directions, roundabouts and lots of green, green grass - yes, we went there on our honeymoon. Loved it. Want to go back.

My husband, Tim, and I flew British Airways and became



Honeymooners:
Tim and Pam
Houghton of Troy
as they looked
seven years ago.

us after our meals were in fact "sweets."

As we stood in line to get our rental car after landing at Heathrow Airport - wind and rain ripping through our hair and jackets - I remember thinking we weren't there for the weather.

No, we were there for history, the legacy of kings and queens, and the famous English countryside.

Mistakenly, we'd actually planned our itinerary ahead of time - where we were going to stay each night of our trip. As our travels progressed, we realized it would have been perfectly reasonable to wing it - there were plenty of bed and breakfast inns to go round.

We were supposed to drive all the way to the Cotswolds to spend the night in a B&B our travel agent had booked for us. But we were so tired from the flight and the time difference that we needed immediate rest before we figured out how to drive the car, steering wheel and transmission positioned on the wrong side of the road. For the immediate moment, we weren't terribly particular about where we stayed, we just wanted a bed to crash in.

Roundabout

We found a hotel near the airport (it wasn't in the greatest neighborhood in the world) and did the horizontal thing for few hours (that means strictly sleeping and nothing else) before we practiced our driving - into London.

We're not necessarily brave souls at heart - in retrospect, we were naive tourists who had no idea how grueling driving could be in a foreign country so dependent on roundabout intersections.

We managed to make it into the heart of London. We parked and walked around the streets of the city while the sky alternated between bleak overcast gray and then pure sunshine interrupted by a few puffs of clouds. The architecture was old and the weather not the least bit stable. Sunshine and rain appear almost simultaneously.

We were struck by the obvious fact that regular blokes lived and worked in these townhouses and office buildings that looked like they housed those of royal lineage.

These buildings were old and not just a quarter of a century old. No, they were probably 500 years old or better. If Henry the VIII revisited his old stomping grounds, he just might recognize them. We were accustomed to the idea that new is better; if you build it, we will come. But these people take great care to preserve their architecture.

As we needed our way back to our Heathrow hotel, we stopped in an obscure London neighborhood for a meal. I'm not sure what made us select a restaurant with a country-western motif, but after listening to Garth Brooks over the sound system and ordering a side of Texas fries with my burger, I felt like saying, "Hey, Ma, look at me. I'm in Dallas."

We would soon enough become accustomed to hearty English breakfasts (with an abundance of not-in-the-least-bit low-fat dairy products), bland battered and fried fish and chips and Shepherd's Pie.

Bath

On the second day, we drove to Bath. There's nothing like getting directions from a native Brit

with a thick peanut-butter-in-their-mouth accent whose "directions" were entirely un-interpretable. Once we managed to navigate our car on the narrow roads without putting dents in our hubcaps (Thank God for car insurance) we did OK.

Bath was a wealthy shopper's dream with a giant Bonneton store in ancient ruins. A pair of Levi's cost more than a pair in Chicago and New York combined. Again, the architecture was startling; curve-shaped stone buildings set in rows of geometric perfection.

The Cotswolds - this was the English countryside so often revered by travelers complete with charming stone cottages, solicitous proprietors, early afternoon tea by the fire on an overcast, windy day (is there any other kind?).

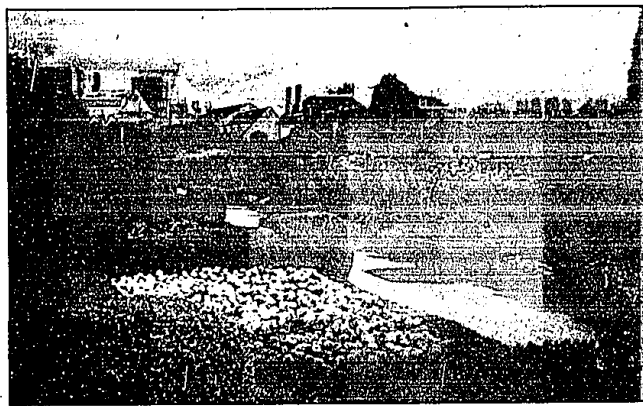
Stratford-Upon-Avon, home of Shakespeare: what a tiny house he lived in. Obviously, mankind has grown since then. As was typical of most towns we visited, the grass was really, really green. Must have something to do with all that rain. (My knowledge of ecological science amazes me.)

Old rocks

Salisbury - on our way to this tucked-away-by-itself little village, we stumbled upon Stonehenge. (How can one just stumble upon Stonehenge? Well, we did.) Our goal was to visit a cathedral in Salisbury, but we managed to drive right by Stonehenge.

Hey, look! Let's turn around. Which we did. Hate to say it, but it was a disappointment. The rocks (which - if you want to get technical - is actually what they are) were roped off from the public. You could circle around them as the wind and rain whipped through you (weather seems to be a theme here) but you could not go past the rope. Instead, you could look at the rocks (which we did), listen to a head-phone-guided tour (which we didn't) and take note of the unfortunate graffiti that had been spray-painted on the rocks.

Once we finished ravaging the English countryside, we spent our last few days in London tucked away in charming places, we



Stratford: Garden and grass are well maintained in Stratford-Upon-Avon, Shakespeare's hometown.

checked into what we were led to believe (by that travel agent back in the states) was a luxury hotel. Luxury must have a different definition in London.

Our room had twin beds. Even though we were on our honeymoon, we could live with that. But, we couldn't live with the inoperable toilet. We asked for another room.

OK, the new room was a bit more luxurious. At least they had the forethought to push the twin beds together! And, hey, the toilet worked. What more could a couple of easygoing Americans ask for?

Swingin' London

As we had surrendered our car, we had to rely on our feet to get around. And get around we did. Hyde Park (with its gothic trees arranged eerily in perfect row after perfect row), Piccadilly Circle (where, as culturally enlightened Americans, we visited Madame Tussaud's Rock Circus Wax Museum; we have a

very life-like picture of my husband standing next to the prototypical young female late '70s London punk, gazing into her eyes - yuck!) and the London theater (with audience participation yet).

My husband, a lifelong Rolling Stones fan, had to visit a cafe owned by Bill Wyman.

And so, we walked. And walked. And walked. It was far, far away. We were certainly in no fear of gaining weight from all the bacon and cream and granola and deep-fried foods we ate while on our trip. We walked off nearly every stinking calorie.

We finally got there and, well, what do you in a cafe owned by Bill Wyman but eat? And so we did as we studied the vintage photographs of Mick and the gang. We kept hoping that maybe, just maybe, Bill was on the premises ... he would have been our sole celebrity sighting. But, alas, all we managed to do was buy a memorabilia T-shirt which, to this day, I wear when I

work out. Makes me think of London every time.

Since my blow-dryer blew up at the beginning of the trip (and I had a converter - can't figure that one out) I was dependent on hotel provided hair drying equipment for styling. Once we got outside, however, it made no difference as the wind and rain created a whole new style for me.

And our pictures certainly show it as I am standing in front of Scotland Yard (hair whipped into a frenzy), Westminster Abbey (hair looking like a wet rat from unexpected downpour) and the Buckingham Palace (hair blown entirely eastward). The hair was immortalized in London.

Seven years and two kids later, I'm still waiting for that most opportune time to return to the great British Isles. But maybe this time we'll go when the weather's good.

Pam and Tim Houghton live in Troy.



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