

24 Hours in London

2001

London Journal 2001

In Late July/early August, I had the distinct privilege of going on a month long trip to Tokmok, Kyrgyzstan (former Soviet Republic) to teach English as a goodwill ambassador. On the way, my three friends and I spent 24 hours in London. This was a lot of fun because none of them had ever been to Europe, let alone London, so I got to play tour guide. Since we only had 24 hours, We tried to get in as much as possible. We had so much fun, we came back to Heathrow for three hours on the way back. OK, our flight was pre-arranged that way...

Unfortunately, due to the sensitive nature of what we were doing in Kyrgyzstan (even something as innocent as teaching English), I cannot publish what I did, and who I met (all wonderful people, really) while in that former Soviet Republic.

7/26/01

Penny came to my house early so we watched a Rick Steves video on London. Penny was packing heavy. She had two monster bags that weighed 65 lbs. each. She also had two heavy carry-ons.

Eventually, Kristi came and drove us to SFO. Dan came next with his whole family and a huge 50lb white box for me to claim as luggage. Inside was a computer for Kyrgyzstan. Tom and family came much, much later. We prayed in the airport lobby then went to catch our plane.

My plan was to get to the airport early to get the choice seats on the 747 (seats from aisles 51-53) for our whole group. The ticket agent would only give seats to those who were there. Penny and I were able to get the right side of 53, Dan got the left side of 51 and Tom got the middle section of 54.

Though Tom didn't get a window or an aisle seat, he sat next to a child and a single mom. They all had a great time for the entire flight. I watched a couple movies and slept.

7/27

Great news! We got to the airport half an hour early. Unfortunately, because we were early, we had to wait for other planes to leave. We actually got to our gate a little over an hour late! We didn't want to carry our heavy bags so we decided to check them in at the airport. The line was long, each bag was hand-checked, and there was only one person doing it. We checked in our heavy bags (VERY slowly) and took the train to the Limegrove Hotel. The quad room had a double bed and two singles in it, so Tom and I spent the evening together.

Our first stop was to the British Museum. Dan was amazed by the London Underground subway system. When we got to the British Museum, we stuck with the majors: The Rosetta Stone, Assyrian and Babylonian relief sculpture, and the Elgin Marbles (the statues from the Parthenon in Athens). Dan took many pictures of the Rosetta Stone. I had never seen any of this stuff, so this was quite special for me. The Greek statues were also amazing.

We took a taxi to the British Library next. Dan was once again impressed and a little scared as the taxi showed no fear through the London streets. Once we got there, we saw many great works of literature like the Lindisfarne Gospels (Celtic, c 700), Some original papyrus of the book of John and of Revelations (Greek, c300), a Gutenberg Bible, the Magna Carta, Beowulf, Shakespeare, early maps, and loads of illuminated manuscripts. In the music section, I liked the way the composer's handwriting matched their mindset. Beethoven (and James Joyce in literature) were very messy and a bit scary. Bach had not one straight line. Everything he wrote was frilly. Mozart's handwriting was precise.

The library closed and dinner called, so we took the tube to Leichester square. We got a little lost, and the locals were no help,



Dan on the London Underground



Tom, Brian (me) and Dan in front of the British Museum



Big Ben at Dusk

Trafalgar Square. We were all very tired when we got to the hotel.

7/28

I got up very early so I took a walk around the neighborhood. Whenever I visit Europe, this is one of my favorite things to do. I love to watch the local people start their day. I love the smell of fresh bread in the morning.

The English breakfast back at the hotel was yummy. My shower felt wonderful. It was already hot and muggy this morning. Somehow, we had landed in a heatwave.

We went to the Tower of London to see the castle and the Crown Jewels. It was past time to go by the time we finished, but Tom felt the need to shop anyway. Dan and I set a meeting place with Penny then went to take a picture of the Tower Bridge. We came back to the meeting place and Penny and Tom weren't there. It took 45 minutes to

but we eventually found the square, then walked to Trafalgar Square. Penny, who was in sandals the whole time, was developing blisters so she bought some tennis shoes between the two squares. We ate at the Clarence Pub near Trafalgar square. The fish and chips, and the beer were excellent (OK, Dan didn't like the character of the beer so much, but we all found it to be very drinkable). Tom learned how to play snooker with the drunken locals. Penny and I discovered that next door was the old Scotland Yard.

After dinner, we did the Westminster walk from Trafalgar to Westminster Abbey. The Parliament building with Big Ben and the exterior of Westminster Abbey were highlights. The Westminster tube stop was closed due to a bomb threat, so we had to walk all the way back to



Westminster Abbey



Tower of London

find them. Now we were totally late and in danger of missing our flight.

We grabbed a cab rather than take the tube because we all felt that it might be quicker. It turned out that we were probably wrong, but it did give us a cab from the hotel to the train station; something we would not have had otherwise. Also, as it turned out, we were the cabby's very first faire, so the ride across town was free! We grabbed our bags at the Limegrove hotel and headed to Victoria Station. We somehow lost Tom at the station, so we had to go search for him. Fortunately, the tube ride was very fast. Because we were late in getting to the check-in counter, they put us in a special line that moved us right to the front. We pretty much walked right on the plane after that. As we were getting on the plane, we met up with our Southern California contingent; Audrey, Becky and Katherine. We all got on the plane and realized that this thing had no air conditioning. It was well into the 90s. We sat on the ground for 45 minutes; sweating before takeoff.

There was little to see outside, so we all turned to the movie. "The Dish" was an outstanding movie about the Australian Radar dish that allowed Americans to view the first moon landing. We landed in Baku in total darkness to refuel. It was hotter than blazes in our unconditioned plane, and they wouldn't let us off.

While sitting and sweating, we talked to an Italian lady who had been to Kyrgyzstan before. She warned us

about the corrupt government, and showed us some hand signs that were both appropriate and inappropriate so that we would not offend people once we got there. As an Italian, she knew her hand signs. It turned out that she was a missionary in Kyrgyzstan at one point, but was now going elsewhere. We soon took off and the temperature went back to normal. I slept.

7/29

My Birthday! And the fun in Kyrgyzstan began...

On the way home...

8/19

Well, it was finally time to leave. The men were able to get four or five hours of sleep before our 2:30AM wake up. The women had stayed up all night.

When we were about to leave our apartment, Tom asked, "who is going to carry my bags?" He had two duffel bags and a suitcase, all told weighing well over 150 pounds. Dan and I each had two bags and we were ready to take them over to the women's apartment ourselves. Tom had seriously overpacked.

Tom walked over to the women's apartment so he could get some guys to help him with his bags. They showed up in a taxi soon after. We all packed our stuff in the taxi, then packed ourselves in. When we got to the women's apartment, a 20 person bus was waiting for us. Dan and I took the taxi to the airport with two others. The rest took the bus.

We took a brief detour into Kazakstan to get cheap gas, then rode in this shock-worn taxi for the next hour and a half on our way to Manas airport. When we got there, we took group photos and hugged a lot. The people of Kyrgyzstan do not hug a lot, so this was a big deal. Some were just bawling. Eventually, we began the process of going through security checks. The kids could watch our progress the whole time on the other side of the thick glass wall. My passport and exit visa were scrutinized and all my bags went through a metal detector even before I could proceed to the check-in counter. I got stopped for the Swiss army knife I had in my backpack. Since it was going in stowed baggage, it was not confiscated. Next up was visa inspection and manual baggage checks (I got waived through). It was then that we were allowed to approach the check-in counter one at a time.

They didn't let us choose our seats for the all important last leg home. I was personally hoping that we would all be separated so I could spend 12 hours with someone I didn't know, but someone mentioned that we were all traveling together, so they put us all together (at my work, this is not allowed when we travel, lest we kill each other before we arrive at our destination. The same should apply here!). I got a left side window on all flights with Penny and Tom as my companions the whole way. My passport was checked and stamped at passport control, then me and my carryon went through one final metal detector.

I was sweating once I got through all that because it was hot in this airport. I was worried that I would develop a rash like I did on the way over (extended flights will do that to anyone). All the kids were still on the other side of the glass; still crying. We all began to feel like we were in a fishbowl, so Dan wrote a kind note that basically said, "go home." They left and we could then relax. Some of us slept; some went to eat. I walked around and did stretching exercises.

When our plane was ready to go, they took everyone to another room. Wouldn't you know it, Tom and the Southern California girls were all in the bathroom. We waited for a while then left Penny to guard their stuff while we saved a not so great place in line for them. There was one final passport and ticket check, then we were off.

Western Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are boring from the air. It's a desert region — completely uninhabited—with an occasional mountain. I couldn't wait for the movie to begin even though I had never heard of it. The movie was "Blowdry," an English flick about a beauty parlor competition. It was really good, but they cut the movie off at the climax because we had to land in Baku. We never did see the end of the movie.

Baku is nothing more than an oil field in the desert by water. The mostly white buildings appeared mostly black due to all the soot. I was not impressed. I could never actually imagine visiting that city as a tourist, even though it was touted as a tourist destination. I guess I had to get into the town to see its charms.



A plane zips past us

We were back in the air shortly after refueling. The pilot said that we would be taking the more exciting southern route over Austria and Switzerland on our way to London. It sounded great, but there was solid cloud cover the entire way there and we saw nothing. At least we finished the in flight movie this time.



The exciting city of Baku

When we got to London it was raining. No matter, we got to shop indoors at terminal 4 for two and a half hours. Once I had given a brief walking tour of the terminal and we had found our next gate, we all went shopping. I bought Tolberone

chocolate and another English figurine (one for every trip). I also had a McDonald's shake. It was amazing. Once I had finished shopping, Tom and I did laps around the terminal until it was time to leave.

I watched "Shreck," "Spy Kids," and "Blow" on the way to LA. Tom, who was asleep on the aisle seat, had Penny and I trapped for a while. Eventually, we barreled past him, went to the bathroom, then walked and stretched as we hung out by the kitchen.

When we got to LA, I knew that we didn't have much time. After passport check, we went to get our bags. Wouldn't you know it, our bags were last off the conveyor. We then had a long line to contend with. Tom wanted to declare stuff he didn't need to and I told him that this would slow us down. He did anyway. Dan, Penny and I said good-bye to the Southern California girls and for a while, to Tom as well as he was stuck in the "declare" line. We were directed to the "express transfer" line so we could get our transfer to United taken care of. It also happened to be the line for lost luggage reporting so the line was long and slow. It was so slow that Tom was able to join us. We eventually had to ask for front of line privileges.

We got our tickets, they took our stowed luggage, then we got on a shuttle bus to get to the United terminal. We had a whopping five minutes left when we got to the gate, so Dan and I shaved then went down a long escalator just for fun. Unfortunately, there was no up escalator, so we ran up the down escalator. Towards the top, I ran out of steam and almost didn't make it. I was gaining no ground so I had to make a real effort that left me winded. I was hot and sweaty as we got on the plane to San Jose. The flight went quickly and before you knew it, we were home. I was so glad to see my family again. Courtney kept hugging me.

Penny and I never did get our luggage. It didn't make it on our plane and was due to arrive two hours later. We didn't wait. We had just traveled 31 hours from door to door. The kind folks at United delivered our bags the next morning.

What a great trip it was. Teaching English in a foreign land is not scary at all, and is very rewarding. I made many new friends while I was there, and I can hardly wait to go back.

Brian
8/20/01