

When someone says to their parents, “You guys want to pay for a trip to England for me, don’t you?” and they say yes, then a certain amount of worry comes to that person immediately preceding the flight out of the country. Will I like England? Will I learn anything? Will I enjoy all the places I saw on TV? Will the British hate me? Am I going to hate it and blow several thousand dollars my parents spent on me for a favor I was joking with them about and feel incredibly guilty when they ask how it was and I’m forced to say, “I hated it” and “Great Britain is overrated” and then feel terrible the rest of the summer and and...?

And thankfully, that isn’t the case for most people when they go on vacation. Probably just me. While waiting in the terminal for my flight (or *our* flight, rather, as there were 23 people on the trip), it certainly was unnerving to hear a group of strangers talking about how much the trip was going to cost them and the kind of debt they would be in. Certainly too, hearing, “I’ll cut you” while jesting with a young woman who introduced herself as Liz did nothing to make me feel more at ease.

If I had known at the time that Liz was an inexplicable paradox, I wouldn’t have been so baffled at her nonchalant threat to cut me, nor at her comment that it was “fate” that we sat next to each other on the plane. At least John, one of the three other men on the trip, wasn’t too alarming. That is, until he began acting like our dad. But I digress. I believe I had brought up waiting in the terminal for the plane.

The terminal, right. Both the one in Chicago and London were a mess of people, luggage, and unintelligible intercom announcements that always made me think, “What

was that? Did they just say something about our flight? Have we been delayed?” As it happened, the flight was delayed slightly, but as far as I know, there was no announcement. As for the flight itself, as much as I love the feeling of accelerating to 90,000 miles an hour in a few seconds, the plane ride soon lost its novelty after about 10 minutes. Being 6’7” tall, I was scrunched up into the seat like a giant spring, bent into the shape of a pretzel, and then bottled up under pressure. After seven hours on the plane, I was ready to explode.

I did talk to the strange Liz creature some on the plane ride and bus ride afterwards. It was certainly a relief at least from the long, arduous sitting. Never before have I found sitting to be so exhausting. I cannot describe the sheer pain from sitting so long that I felt in my—well, all over, really. Aches, coupled with a lack of sleep, being in a different country, and a general worry that I would not enjoy myself led to a great relief when we finally climbed off the bus.

Then we saw “it.” Harlaxton manor. I put it in quotes because there is no pronoun, or any word for that matter, that sufficiently suits Harlaxton. “It” is like a palace out of some absurd fantasy novel. It reminds me of the Tower of Babel: some giant building reaching for a great pinnacle it can never achieve. It looms in the distance as you approach, never seeming to get closer, like some floating citadel in the clouds. But at the same time, it’s completely absurd. Once you are standing in front of it, you cannot see the full enormity of it without looking around in a 180-degree angle. Then, should you walk a few dozen yards back, it’s gone again and once more becomes that floating palace in the sky. “It” is a fleeting manor—you can neither understand it with a

photograph alone, nor can you lock it into memory, for your brain refuses to acknowledge the impossibility of “it.”

Physically, it’s a tan colored building, decorated with a juxtaposition of curves and straight edges and pointed, round towers in various locations. In front, there are two main gates and each is the size of a small house. Looking at the manor draws you into an almost mystical trance that seems to make you forget everything, including what the manor looks like, so that you must constantly look again to remind yourself that it’s really there. It strives to impress you beyond any previous point in which you have been impressed. And yet, it cannot. It can never reach its goal, because “it” is so unbelievable that it’s just unbelievable.

So, naturally, as soon as I stepped off the bus and stood in front of the manor, I realized that in no way would I regret coming on the trip. Now, I’ll stop here a moment, as you may be thinking to yourself, “Well, this is a bit tripe. He sees how gorgeous the house is, so suddenly, his worries are gone?”

Well yes, frankly, it is a bit tripe. Traveling is about seeing wondrous landmarks and going to new places, right? Obviously if the very first location I saw was beyond words could describe, then the trip was bound to be worthwhile. So, sorry if that came off as tripe. But, in actuality, this isn’t about not letting my parents down. And should you be wondering, yes, I am getting to my point, honestly. Just bear with me for a little while longer.

Where was I before being rudely interrupted? Oh yes—after we arrived, I took a look around the inside of the house, and we were later given the full tour and short history. I won’t attempt to describe the inside of Harlaxton. The description I offered up

of the outside did such a meager and abysmal job that I don't think I should shame myself by trying to describe the great halls and chambers of the manor.

The inside of Harlaxton is really nice. No. Really, really nice. There, I've shamed myself anyway. You can picture the shiny gold room that looks like the inside of a gleaming, gold-plated, jewel-encrusted chest, right? The bulky cedar staircase designed to look like it climbs right up into the clouds? Just visit the manor yourself, then we can nod at each other in silent acknowledgement of the miracle that we have both witnessed.

At any rate, on the tour we learned that Harlaxton was built by a very arrogant man who wanted a better home than Belvoir castle, which is five miles from the manor. So, three days into the trip, curious, and always having had a love affair with castles, I decided I wanted to begin my list of site-seeing locales. I went out on a walk to the castle with Krystal, who I was just starting to become acquainted with. Krystal is one of the six who would compose a little posse that had stuck together for trips: Krystal, Liz, Bri, Jen, John, and myself. Liz, by this point, I knew well enough to call a friend and classified her as a strange, but amazing person. I believe someone described her perfectly (aside from 'paradox') as "such a precious gem." So, Krystal was the second person I really got to know. She's a sweet, innocent-like girl who enjoys playing the bagpipes. She also has a love affair with sheep, much like my love affair with castles. In fact, I took a picture of her with some sheep on the way to Belvoir.

Oh yes. Belvoir. I was digressing again. Sorry.

I was nothing but a very large smile for a few minutes as Krystal and I walked up to the entrance of the castle. It was my first real castle. There were battlements and towers and inside, there were paintings and suits of armor and the whole deal. We—

Krystal and I—unfortunately didn't have a lot of time to view the castle, as the walk took longer than we thought it would. I blame Krystal's sheep obsession for the unexpected length. No—I joke, honestly (though we did spend a while looking at sheep). And regardless, a kind (and cute) woman who worked at the castle gave us a ride back to Harlaxton. We got a high-five from the principal on our return, which was odd, simply put.

The rest of the week went by mostly uneventful and that weekend, we (the aforementioned posse) headed off to London. London, London, London. You see and hear about London in TV shows and such and it looks so rustic. By the time we left, however, I believe we were all in agreement that London looked, felt, and smelled like a ghetto. Or perhaps a garbage dump? No—ghetto for certain. The Tower of London was probably my favorite place. The ruler they had set up next to a large suit of armor that had 6'9" listed as "giant" was quite amusing.

I got to know Bri, John, and Jen fairly well in Lodon. John's commanding, sometimes overbearing, attribute began to show through a little, but overall he seemed like a nice guy. And Bri? Bri is ... what's a good word to describe her? Special? Yes, that seems fitting. Bri survives on cereal and ice cream. By the old rule of thumb, she should be a walking rice-crispy sundae. But she's also a nice person and fun to be around. As for Jen, well, we mostly don't care for Jen, so we try to just pretend she wasn't on the trip. But who is this 'we' and why am I talking about my group? I'm supposed to be describing my trip to London.

I saw parts of Westminster Abbey, including the rose chamber, which was a round room with giant stain glass windows. I also saw the Sherlock Holmes museum. It

was a building filled with antique tools and furniture, designed to appear how Sherlock's home would conceivably appear. I've never read any of the Holmes novels, but I am a fan of the phrase, "elementary, my dear Watson." I believe it was that night we had a few drinks in a gay bar. Well, they claim it was a gay bar because there were one or two gay couples. I'm sure I saw at least two gay couples in London, but that doesn't make it a gay city. Regardless, we had a few drinks the next night at our ghetto hostel and Liz (who was drunk, I assume) wanted to know how big my—well. No one needs to know about that conversation.

I can't remember if that was before or after I taught the Polish dancer a new English word, dodgy, and the girls in our group were petrified by the graveyard behind our hostel. Some of us did get a slightly better hostel the next night and I think John and I fell in love with the cute Australian lady who ran the place.

Wait, wait. I'm digressing again. **London.** I'm supposed to be describing **London.** It was nice, overall. We all knew the Underground like the back of our hands by the time we left. It frightened Jen and Bri nauseous, but it was still an incomparable method of traveling around the city. And Bri becomes nauseous fairly often, I think. She was nauseous on a bus once before and we started saying, "I think I'm going to Bri" instead of "I think I'm going to throw-up" and—and there I go again talking about my posse. It seems they've hijacked my essay.

I'm simply going to have to go find them and complain. Maybe I'll cut them.

Oh... I did promise a point to this, didn't I? Well, the point is this: Traveling is more about—wait, no—no, it's just too tripe to say. But if you think long and hard about the progression of this essay, you can figure it out. Safe travels and farewell, dear reader.