

15 England--Home Away from Home

Heidelberg, West Germany, to Bruges, Belgium,
to London, capital of England
Sunday, May 16 to Monday, May 17

Excited, we were on the road by 8 A.M. prepared for over twenty-four hours of travel. Heading northwest, we soon met the Rhine River which we paralleled, bypassing Mainz, birthplace and residence of the printing inventor, Gutenberg, and Bonn, birthplace of Beethoven and capital of West Germany.

Reaching modern Cologne around noon, Graeme parked the bus behind the magnificent Cologne Cathedral with its twin spires of over 500 feet piercing the sky. Neil told us that this was the largest Gothic edifice in the world. Its construction had begun in 1248 but was not fully completed until 1880.

With a couple of hours for lunch and touring, everyone set out in smaller groups beginning at the cathedral. The cold interior of this huge old structure filled with a scattering of tourists and worshipers was lighted only by candles and daylight penetrating the stained glass windows. An organ recital began

as we passed by the high altar where a solid gold shrine held relics belonging to the Three Wise Men brought from Rome in 1164.

The organ music was so impelling that some of us found seats and stayed for awhile to listen. Afterwards, Nino and I left in search of the McDonald's that Neil had told us about on the bus. We located it a couple of blocks from the cathedral and ordered two Big Macs and french fries to go. We ate as we window shopped our way back to the bus.

Forty miles west of Cologne, we crossed into Belgium, characterized by lovely half-timbered houses with heavily thatched roofs. Barreling over the flat green lowlands, bypassing quaint villages and Brussels, Belgium's capital, then speeding on to Bruges near the coast took slightly over two and a half hours.

In Bruges, we drove to our campsite for showers and dinner only. Neil had canceled our overnight reservations, but had reserved a private dining room for us in the attractive camp restaurant and ordered our last dinner. Here, sitting at tables covered in white linen, we were served one of the finest meals of the trip. Waiters and waitresses in Belgian costumes decorously served us a dinner of steak or roast chicken, fried potatoes, cooked vegetables and green salad followed by enormous chocolate sundaes and good coffee.

By 10:30 P.M., we were back on the bus and began the twelve mile drive to the North Sea port of Ostend to catch the midnight ferry across the English Channel. Ours was one of the first ve-

hicles in line at the dock. As we waited, the group became rather quiet. Nino, after talking with Neil and Graeme, headed for his seat at the rear of the bus. As he passed me in an aisle seat, he stopped momentarily to squeeze my hand and kiss my forehead. Even though no words were exchanged, I sensed he would miss me as I would him. Everyone would miss someone.

Two trailers carrying Formula One race cars returning from the Belgian Grand Prix pulled alongside the bus. Several of the girls got off the bus to visit with this English racing team. Seeing them, reminded me that I should contact Tom and Michelle while in London.

Driving onto the ferry, we left the bus carrying our sleeping bags and climbed a flight of stairs to the main deck. We occupied an empty restaurant-lounge for the five hour Channel crossing.

Before retiring, we had a "commencement ceremony" of sorts. Cindy and Myra had made each of us a diploma from construction paper, denoting individual characteristics observed along the way. Although I thought I had made a concerted effort to conceal rising early for disciplined makeup and grooming, my diploma read as follows:

Let it be known that Chris has, by the Demented Duchy of Displaced Drongoes, been granted The Order Of The Dawn Award For Good Grooming, to wit seal affixed this 16th day of May, 1976.

Sundowners Overland

In a mood of jubilation and applause, we listened as each diploma was read and presented to the "graduate." Then we exchanged autographs and took photos.

The group split up for rest. Several of us found empty benches on which we spread our sleeping bags and rested while some of our girls, too excited to sleep, vocalized softly for one last time. The soft harmonized strains of hymns attracted the kitchen crew who asked for encores.

Eventually silence reigned for a couple of hours until dawn when the white cliffs of Dover were sighted. This sent us scrambling outside with sleeping bags in hand. Through the morning mist, the historic cliffs became clearer while seagulls circled the ferry as it rounded the jetty into the small harbor. Quickly we piled into the bus and within minutes the huge ferry door opened on England!

Closeby at the customs building an inspector boarded the bus and instructed us to remove all of our possessions. Anything left in the bus was subject to confiscation. Heavy laden, we passed through customs without one bag being searched. Passports stamped, we returned to the bus for the two hour drive to London.

Graeme was again driving on the left side of the road. The English downs were vibrant in their flowing greens graced here and there with an occasional Tudor home. Passing through Canterbury, we saw its stunning cathedral founded in 597. Twenty miles farther on, we stopped for a quick breakfast, then took the motorway busy with morning commuters.

Driving through the London suburbs, we eventually paralleled the Thames River where we had our first glimpses of Westminster Abby, Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament. We crossed the river on our way to Earls Court where Sundowners and other Australian bus company offices were located.

Neil picked up the mike for the last time and read our final room assignments at the bed and breakfast Mardis Hotel near the Sundowners' office. Then he announced that a reunion party would be held on Thursday, May 27th, at a place yet to be determined. Sundowners would have this information for us in a couple of days.

Upon arrival at Sundowners but still on the bus, I took a portrait photo of Jen's beaming face that said it all, "We had made it!" Before debarking, Robert took the mike and presented Neil and Graeme small gifts of money from the group as a token of our appreciation for a job well done. Though there would be a reunion, not all could attend because of conflicting travel plans. Thus the time for goodbyes had come.

London
May 18 to 29

Like many of my Aussie friends, I made Earls Court my home until my departure for New York on May 29th. Known also as "Kangaroo Valley," Earls Court had for some time been the home away from home for many young Australian travelers. It also appeared to be a melting pot for Asians. Here, Indians, Pakistanis, Afghanis, and Iranians crowded the sidewalks. Arabs plied the walks in flowing robes and matching headgear. The veil was again present as

was the pungent aroma of sizzling kebab. Oil sheikhs, many with chauffeurs, in their Rolls-Royces and Bentleys darted in and out of the traffic which was laden with cute black cabs and red doubledecker buses.

At first I roomed with Jen and Tanya and purposely avoided museums and other tourist attractions. Rest, rest and more rest was the prescription for me. It was marvelous to sleep between clean sheets on comfortable beds, to enjoy an abundance of hot water while bathing and to use spotless toilets at any time. I hoped that I would not soon take such everyday comforts for granted.

Eventually I stepped out into London. Her sidewalks swelled with American and European tourists, many of whom were on street corners pouring over London maps. Shoppers swarmed to Marks and Spencers for bargains and to world famous Harrods for expensive and exclusive purchases. One large department store even featured a fine window display of the American Revolutionary era, supporting the American Bicentennial celebrations across the Atlantic.

During my London sojourn, I saw very little of Nino. He was frantically trying to find permanent accommodations and had been filling out applications for that bus driving position at the various Australian firms. One day though he did come to visit us at the Mardis. It was early in the morning and I was still in bed, but Jen and Tanya were dressed when he knocked. He looked so handsome in a new suit and striking tie. He was on his way to his first interview. We all wished him well.

The day finally came for me to bid farewell to Jen and Tanya. Before leaving on a bus tour to Russia with another group, they were going to visit Jen's relatives on the island of Jersey. We parted tearfully, hoping to meet again within a year. They both had planned to stay abroad for eighteen months. Following their summer jaunts, Tanya, if not accepted as a housemaid at Buckingham Palace, would either spend the winter working for the British Broadcasting Company in London or would fillet fish in Iceland, a job which paid very well; Jen would remain in London through the winter and do private nursing through an agency.

After their departure, I moved in with Eileen at the Mardis. She would be staying in London several weeks before returning to California. Time in London was running out for me. I had no alternative but to forego the reunion so that I could visit Tom and Michelle in Sussex.

On the 27th, carrying my shoulder bag, I boarded the noon train at Victoria Station for Horsham. Here, Michelle met me in her Porshe and we drove over winding country roads past picturesque villages, many dating back to feudal times. Within twenty minutes, we arrived at Ludington, Tom and Michelle's six acre estate.

The two-hundred-year-old ivy-covered Tudor house was surrounded by lawns bordered by hedges and flowers. In the front yard a graceful willow overhung the circular fish pond full of darting goldfish. We parked the car in the four car garage near the servants' ivy-covered cottage. Then Michelle took me on a walking tour of the grounds. Directly behind the two-story home

was the swimming pool and bathhouse equipped with a sauna. The tennis court was behind a row of evergreens.

We entered the house through the kitchen. Recently redecorated, the first floor glowed in warm tones of yellow. Michelle put on the tea kettle and then escorted me upstairs to the blue guest room overlooking the pool. I rejoined her shortly in the kitchen where we drank Indian tea as we caught up on news of Yvonne and their racing experiences in South Africa. Africa.

After tea, we leashed Pandy, the beagle, for a walk through the paddock where a neighbor's horse grazed. Miles of green undulating hills broken by the darker green hedgerows surrounded us. I could well understand how one could prefer life in this serene setting to the constant exhilaration of London.

Back at the house, Michelle settled me in the den with dozens of photos taken during the Australian racing circuit while she prepared dinner. Tom arrived home from his London office, soon joined me in the den and prepared drinks. Michelle brought in hors d'oeuvres and joined us. A simple but succulent chicken and rice dinner followed in the kitchen.

Wanting me to experience an English country pub, Tom drove us in their silver Rolls to one several miles away. Here, while sipping glasses of warm beer, we watched the rural folk play pool and the slot machines. By 10:30 we were back at Ludington and off to bed.

The next morning following a hearty English breakfast, Tom and I bid Michelle goodbye and drove into London where Tom dropped

me off at congested Picadilly Circus for a bus tour of the city.

On the bus I met Nathan, a delightful young geology professor from the University of Calgary on sabbatical leave. The whirlwind tour of London left my head spinning as I tried to photograph famous landmarks through the bus window. Arriving back at Picadilly, Nathan and I lunched at a nearby cafeteria and made plans for the evening.

After lunch, I returned to the hotel to pack for my flight to the States the following day. I found a note from Nino under my door saying that he would escort me to Heathrow Airport in the morning.

With the packing done, I bathed and put on a new dress I had bought at one of London's stores. What a wonderful feeling to wear a new dress after so many weeks in jeans! I then took the underground to Picadilly where I met Nathan for an enjoyable dinner followed by a walk to the Savoy Theater where we saw Agatha Christie's play, Murder at the Vicarage.

Back at the hotel by 1 A.M., I phoned my friend Elaine in New York to tell her the time of my arrival. I would stay with her and another friend Barbette for awhile before continuing by bus to Kansas and then California.

The excitement of going home began to build making it nearly impossible for me to sleep. Although I was up by 8 A.M., I was running late when Nino knocked on the door at 11:00. Eileen had decided to accompany us to the airport, so the three of us hurried to the neighborhood British Airways' bus stop.

On the bus, Nino informed us that he had been accepted by Sundowners for training as a bus driver. This meant that if he passed the training course, he would be based in London for at least a year. This was great news; now possibly I just might be able to see him again.

Heathrow was crammed with tourists, businessmen and immigrants from every part of the world. We shoved our way through the crowd to the British Airways' counter where I learned that it was too late to check my suitcase. We continued on to the international flight area where we said our quick goodbyes. With a hug and a kiss, Nino and I agreed to write. I hoped to see Eileen in San Francisco in a couple of months.

After my passport was stamped, I ran, carrying my suitcase, shoulder and sleeping bags and purse down the seemingly endless corridor to the British Airways' checkout station. The final call had been made and the last airport bus was waiting to take me to the plane.

The 747 was practically empty. Settled at my window seat, sad but excited, I began to relax while the plane taxied down the runway. Before I knew it, we were over St. George's Channel and then the southern tip of Ireland. The Emerald Isle was shrouded in a faint mist. The sheer beauty of the scene below and the friends I was leaving behind convinced me that I would have to return before long.

My thoughts turned toward the immediate future as I adjusted my headset. Diana Ross was singing the theme song from the movie Mahogany:

Do you know where you're going to?

Do you like the things that life is showing you?

Where are you going to?

Do you know?

At that moment, all I knew was that I was going home to America and my family. How would they be after two years?