

London, England
21 November – 28 November 2004

20 Nov 2004 - Sunday

Dallas

Started off in DFW on a sour note... our crack security got obsessed with Kathleen's shoes. When she wouldn't send them thru X-Ray, she got shunted off for a security search. The woman who searched her didn't seem to understand why it happened either: she never did check Kathleen's shoes! I walked through unmolested.

Tried to sweet-talk our way into an upgrade with British Airlines, but they were selling them instead (\$150 each – one way). We ended up wishing we had paid... the seating was 3 -5 – 3, and the seats were close together. All three people in front of us reclined, so we had very little room. Plus it was hot, and we ran into a lot of turbulence the whole way. All together hard to sleep, but we both managed to get some rest anyway. I know I feel more rested than I can ever recall being upon arrival.

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London

Just one small snag at immigrations... the airline said we only needed one arrival card, but that was wrong. Just caused a few minutes delay (the agent even gave us a pen!) and we were on our way (with another passport stamp!).

Took the Gatwick Express to London. Other than being a little sleep, getting through customs & immigration and then to the train was a breeze. Everything seems familiar.

We are looking forward to a cup of coffee when we get to Victoria Station (which should be about 8:30: we landed at 7:00).

Left home without a watch (both of mine need a battery). Bought one for \$10 at DFW... I hope it lasts all week!

Stopped off at the McDonalds at Victoria Station for coffee, got some cash at an ATM, bought our 7-day Tube/Bus pass (£20 each) and took the tube to the Dolphin Square Hotel. Our room wasn't available, so we checked our bags (I discovered, to my horror, that I had left my fuzzy on the plane!) and set out.

It was a cool, overcast day, but not unpleasant. We had umbrellas, but never quite needed them. Went up to the Spitafields Market [<https://oldspitalfieldsmarket.com/>] and walked through the maze of stalls (I bought a Columbia fuzzy for £7) before deciding we'd had enough and were hungry. The market had some food but nothing sounded good (or Italian) so we tubed it over to Leister Square and ate at our favorite London restaurant, Bella Italia. They opened at 12:00 (just in time for us) and we enjoyed (thoroughly) lasagna, garlic bread with wine for £23. Dragged our tired selves back to the hotel, checked into our room (624) and slept until 6:00.

Clean and refreshed, we took the #24 bus up to Trafalgar Square (note to self: the tube passes work on the bus too- just showed the pass to the bus driver) and walked around a bit taking in the sights and scoping out places to eat. Found that we had missed an outdoor market at St. Martin in the Field and Covent Gardens. Oh well, can't do everything!

Ended up eating dinner the White Lion pub (at the corner of James and Floral streets). Had fish and chips and Kroonenberg beer that really seemed to hit all of the right spots in an upstairs dining room. Found

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lots of neat looking places to eat above Trafalgar Square on the way to Covent Garden. Its called The Strand on our Frommers map.

Walking back to the bus stop we were enticed into an Irish pub by the promise of live music. Had a pint before catching our old friendly #24 bus back to the hotel.

I had a really unpleasant experience there (with a fortunate outcome, thanks to Kathleen). I managed to choke on my vitamin and fiber pills. If Kathleen hadn't been there to administer a Heimlich manuver for me I shudder to think about my trip back home.

[22 Nov 2004 - Monday](#)

London

Slept in very late today. We both woke up early but fell back asleep several times. Kathleen got up first, and we finally made it out of the room just before noon.

Decided to go to Kew Gardens because the day was bright and sunny, although it had clouded over by the time we got going. Still, it was relatively warm, and it did not rain all day.

The London transit system was not at its best today. The Circle and District lines said they would have delays, but a signal failure really brought things to a near stand-still for a while, adding an hour to our 20-minute trip.

It was nice to get out of the city. We had a fun, short walk through the downtown and residential area between the station and the gardens. Had lunch at the snack shop at the Victoria Gate, then took the free 1-hour tour at 2:00. Our guide was Canadian and very knowledgeable about the garden and the plants we saw. Was a small group: another Canadian, a Brit and two Italians (all women) and us.

Had a hour or so of walking on our own before it started to get dark, so we headed back to town. Had heard our guide talk about Fair Trade chocolate, so stopped of at Olivers Organic Market andbought some Green & Black brand candy bars because she swore they were the best. Then pulled into a Starbucks and enjoyed a cup of coffee at a sidewalk table, watching half the towns school children walk past.

Headed back to London and enjoyed a marvelous dinner at La Brasserie, although it did run up quite a bill: Appetizers, dessert and a lot of wine will do that. Kathleen had French Onion soup, Beef Bourgogne, French fries and proseterio's for dessert. I tried to order mussels (not available on Mondays), settled for smoked salmon and Beef Bourgogne.

Took the tube to Victoria Station and found that our favorite quick shop was still there. Picked up a few £7 bottles of wine, some cookies and a few pistachio nuts and headed back to the hotel for an early evening.

[23 Nov 2004 - Tuesday](#)

London

Quite a day. Got up a bit earlier and dragged ourselves to the TKTS Booth at Leister Square by 10:00. Got our first choice: *The Old Masters* at the Comedy Theater on Panton Street. Well, not really our first choice, which was the Producers, which is almost always sold out. We did walk over to the Drake

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Theater to check with the box office (on the advice of the TKTS woman) but they had nothing until next week. They did say that people queue up 2 hours before the matinee for returns though...

Headed up to Hendon next to do the RAF museum. It was a 30 minute tube ride (£3 on top of our Zone 1 / 2 pass) and a 10 minute walk in a more obviously working-class neighborhood than we encountered yesterday near Kew Gardens.

The museum was well done... Had one entire building dedicated to the Blitz on London, lots of interactive displays. They even have Herman Goering's medals on display.

Had lunch there (no breakfast again today – just a cup of coffee after we bought our tickets) of soup and sandwiches, then set off again. They have a really impressive display of aircraft. Got to walk thru a flying boat, sat in the cockpit of a jet trainer, and just wandered around, under and over aircraft ranging from WWI to the Gulf war.

They also had a Ann Frank display (that had attracted a lot of school kids – and Kathleen), mainly pictures and text. Quite an amazing place, especially given the free admission!

Walked back to the train station in the dark about 4:30 and caught the train back into London. We were wimps and went into the first Italian restaurant we passed (a Spaghetti House). Ended up sitting in a cramped hole in the wall (literally!) in the basement. (why do they give the smokers the best tables near the windows?) and had an OK meal (but nothing great). We thought we remembered being similarly unimpressed at one of these last year and decided to give them up.

Walked back towards the theater. Had some time to kill so just sat on a bench in Leister Square and watched the world walk by. It is such mild weather right now that it was entirely pleasant.

Saw a restaurant on Panton Street across from the Comedy Theater that looked good: set piece meal (3 coursed) for £6.95.

Saw the play (both thought it was good). Sat on the main floor with a lot of empty seats behind us. In fact, we moved back for the 2nd half – had a lot more room and still had a good view.

Took the bus home from Trafalgar Square. It is such fun seeing London at night from the upper deck of the bus!

Decided on a night-cap. Tried the bar near our hotel (had a sign in the window touting being recommended by Rick Steves), but it was after 11:00 so they couldn't serve us. Our hotel bar was still serving guests, so we got our drink. However, as Kathleen said, there is just something lacking in a bar where you sit in a hallway. Functional, but no class.

24 Nov 2004 - Wednesday

London

Did not set an alarm, woke up at 9:00 (hey – we are on vacation!). Decided last night that this would be the best day for Cambridge, so after cleaning up (and a cup of coffee – even thought it was instant it sure tasted good. That is just one of the many nice things about this hotel) we set out.

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Took the tube to Kings Cross/St. Pancras and bought discounted (£16.90) round trip tickets. The discount starts at 9:30, so there was an additional benefit to our selfishness: we bought coffee and sandwiches and are now sitting happily on the 11:15.

These day trips have been a nice change of pace from London. The train rides are (of course!) really enjoyable. Even the tube trips to Kew and Hendon were (at the end) mostly above ground, so we got to see more. Today's trip is a "real" train, and we are getting to see a lot of misty, cloud-covered countryside flow past our windows. Got to Cambridge right at 12:00.

Cambridge – way cool! Took the bus to the City Center (£1 each). Had a minor "who's in charge" dispute over which way to go to reach the TI but found it in spite of ourselves. Registered for the tour at 1:30 (£16 for both of us) and wandered about to kill the hour we had to wait until the tour started.

Our tour guide (John) was great. Extremely knowledgeable (He works part time at the university) and very generous with his time (the 2-hour tour lasted 3 hours).

Cambridge itself is really impressive on so many levels. It is old, dating back to the 1300's, and successful (very high graduation rate compared to other universities in England).

The chapel at Kings College was simply awesome: big, ornate, beautiful. The stained glass was beautiful beyond description.

I don't think Rick Steves does Cambridge justice.

Decided against sitting in on the Evensong at the Kings College chapel (the boys choir from Eaton doesn't sing Monday or Wednesday evenings). Stopped to buy a couple of their CD's and went instead to the Eagle Pub for dinner. This place was a favorite of RAF trainees during WWII, where the normal 3-month Spitfire transition course was reduced to 3 days. Many pilots wrote their units, names and other information on the ceiling of the pub, and its still there today.

The food was good: Chicken for me, Salmon for Kathleen, both served with peas, salad and chips, and reasonable (£16:00 for both of us). We grabbed the bus back to the station, bought some coffee and caught the 18:45 express back to London.

[25 Nov 2004 – Thursday \(Thanks Giving\)](#)

London

Resorted to setting an alarm for 8:00 this morning (even though it is a vacation) so we could get a reasonable start on the day. Started out at the Tower of London about 10:00. We would have been there sooner but we both had a significant brain fade and went West instead of East on the Circle Line, then ran into delays once we got going in the right direction. We've run into more delays on the tube these past few days than all of the other trips to London put together.

Anyway, back to the Tower of London... we got there (finally) and had a light breakfast at EAT (we have seen these all over London) before going in. Went right to the Crown Jewels display (I missed them last time – the line was too long) and practically had the display to ourselves. It was nice to be able to take our time – they are well worth seeing.

Went back and picked up a tour in progress with one of the wardens – he was great! Must have been an actor in his previous life, because he sure put on a show for us. We learned a lot too.

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Went through the displays in the White Tower too... they had a cool virtual reality computer program showing what the place looked like throughout history, including some 3-D animations. Very cool.

Decided to have lunch at the cafeteria before we left. They had really good looking food, although we only chose sandwiches.

Walked to the Monument so I could pay £2 to torture myself by climbing 311 steps to enjoy the view. I'm really out of shape – had to stop every 50 steps on the way up, but the view was worth it, and going down was much easier.

Walked on to St. Paul's, but did not spend much time there. Were turned off by the £7 entry fee and by all of the constructions going on inside and outside. Maybe next time...

Took the tube to Westminster Abby instead. Got a quick look inside Margarete's first – barely made it out before they locked the gates. That set the tone for the tour of the Abby. We were the last people they let in (£7.50) and they were hurrying us along and slamming doors behind us every step of the way.

We resisted as much as we could and had a good time in spite of their obvious desire to hurry us along. There is much to see and enjoy there – tombs of many famous people and memorials to many more – lots of history. Cromwell was buried there, but his body was dug up and drawn, quartered and hanged (did I mention he was beheaded too?) 3 years later. Served him right, too!

Headed back to Pimlico and finally got to have a beer at the pub in our neighborhood. Got there before the evening rush (5 pm) and had a few quiet beers before the rush started when we had to leave to get ready for dinner.

We left the hotel at 6:15 thinking we'd have tons of time, but we walked into Simpsons on the Strand (100 Strand) at 6:59 by my watch... Lots of traffic, and the bus just couldn't move.

Had a pretty wonderful meal – Lobster bisque, Scottish beef sliced table-side, good wine and chocolate mouse for dessert. We couldn't tell if the service was fantastic or if we were ignored, so it must have been OK. Got service from 6 or 7 people at one point or another. It was very expensive but we enjoyed every moment of the 2 ½ hours it took.

Stopped off at Charing Cross Station to buy a calling card. I called mom and Mary Ann to wish them a happy Thanksgiving. Kathleen could not reach Mary.

Waited a long time at Trafalgar Square for our bus, then wished it hadn't come. It was standing-room-only-crowded. We finally got upstairs around Victoria Station, only to hear some crazy person down below screaming about "god damned Americans" and how they were killing everyone and how nobody could see it... We joined many of our fellow passengers in getting off at the next stop and walked the rest of the way back to our hotel.

We sure have enjoyed this place, especially being able to sit in the "Living Room" and drink wine, read, watch TV (or try to... there sure wasn't anything worth watching on LAST night) and writing this journal.

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26 Nov 2004 – Friday

London

Where has the time gone? I feel like we just got here, and we are facing our last day tomorrow. I guess we'd better leave while we can still afford to go: £1 cost us \$2.08 today!

On a more positive note, we sure do love coming back "home" each night and relaxing a bit before going to bed. It really helps with my note-keeping too.

The day lured us out of town to Windsor Castle by dawning bright and clear. We caught the 11:08 out of Waterloo Station (£6.70 round trip) for the 50-minute ride. Had a light lunch at a pub on the Eaton side of the river, then headed uphill to the castle. Paid £11.50 (each!), got through the metal detectors, met up with our 13:15 tour guide and proceeded to get rained on for much of his brief but interesting introduction to the castle.

It is a magnificent place, well worth the price of admission. Its big, full of history, and stunningly beautiful on the inside. The fire in 1992 did a lot of damage. Fortunately, most of the art and other treasures were elsewhere (they were re-doing the electrical wiring at the time and a halogen lamp got too close a curtain which started the fire), and they have done an amazing job of restoration (it took 5 years). I can't imagine where they found the craftsmen to do some of the work we saw.

It is impressive how open they are to tourists, and how much of the house we got to see. Of course, the Queen was not there (she is scheduled to arrive Sunday), but even so we were impressed by the setup.

Of course, the sun broke out most of the time we were in the house! The sun was setting as we walked over to St. Georges chapel. Not quite as magnificent as Westminster Abby or the chapel at Kings College in Cambridge but not bad.

Rested our aching feet at a Scottish pub afterwards. No Kroonenberg, but a palatable Carlsberg. Watched it pour outside thru the window before leaving to brave the elements once more. Wandered through the shopping area, mainly watching the stores close as we walked by. Had dinner at Bella Italia (OK, so we are in a rut!). Finally learned our lesson and split everything: Mussels, garlic bread and lasagna with a bottle of wine (£28). Walked back to the train station, grabbed a cup of coffee and caught the 7:16 back to London.

Got in around 8:30, rode the tube over to the Tower of London and walked around a bit killing time until our 9:30 appointment for the Ceremony of the Keys. Took several pictures from the Tower Bridger – hope a few turn out.

Waited by the West gate with quite a crowd: I'd guess a 100 people or so – more than I expected! This turned out to be a really neat experience. Partly it was just fun to be in there at night (and a nice one it was – cool but not cold, with a full moon smiling down at us through a light haze), but more than anything I think it was the sense of history that permeated the event. It has been going on for a very long time, and the sense of solemn pageantry was... what? Impressive? Awe Inspiring? Overwhelming? None of those words adequately express the feeling we both had as we left. However one describes it (or doesn't), we were both glad we had the opportunity to experience it.

By this time it was getting late, so we headed back to the hotel and relaxed, had some more wine, and read (Kathleen) or wrote (me).

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27 Nov 2004 – Saturday

London

Talked about trying to get tickets for the theater tonight but decided that I really didn't want to spend the time buying the tickets and being boxed in by a 7:30 commitment. Talked it over with Kathleen and she agreed (reluctantly).

Made up our "everything we wanted to see in London but didn't" list and headed out to get it done. We had talked ourselves out of taking the boat to Greenwich and decided to make up for it by taking the "Tate to Tate" boat (from the Tate Modern to the Tate). Walked down to the dock but found we faced a 30 minute wait, so sadly crossed the Thames to catch a bus to the Southwark Borough Market. It took a while for the bus to show up... in the end, we spent as long waiting for the bus as we would have spent waiting for the boat.

Finally reached the Borough Market after (seemingly) walking all around it. It really seemed like one of those days where nothing was going to be easy.

The market was fun but crowded. We had coffee and a chocolate croissant and sat for a while enjoying the crisp morning air (it cooled off considerably overnight) and watched the masses of people shuffle by. As the gentleman in the booth kept reminding us, the going rate for a bowl of garlic was £1.

Not having had our fill of crowds yet we tubed over to Harrods for lunch (the smell of all the food was delightful and reminded me of how hungry I was!). Ate at the Rotisserie counter in the food hall. Had to wait 15 minutes, but it was worth it. The food (and the service) was excellent, and it was great fun to sit at the counter and watch the shoppers at the various food counters. We both had the chicken with sautéed vegetables and a glass of the house Chardonnay. Not cheap though: I think the bill came to £30.

Tried to shop, but the crowds were making it no fun at all, so we left.

Went next to Somerset House on the Strand and watched the ice skaters on the rink they had set up in the courtyard. It was very festive, with gas lights all around the ice and Christmas decorations everywhere.

Sat at a table overlooking the Thames and had coffee (me) and wine (Kathleen) and enjoyed the view. Decided a boat ride would cap off the day perfectly, so when we finished our drinks we walked down to the nearby dock (the Embankment), passing the Victoria monument ornament. I had forgotten that it was a ~3000-year-old obelisk from Egypt.

Our luck improve a bit and we caught the last boat tour of the day, an enjoyable 50-minutes tour from Westminster to the Tower Bridge in an all-enclosed boat.

Kathleen was having regrets about not having booked a play, so when we got off the boat we walked up to the TKTS booth at Leicester Square to see if they had any tickets left, but they didn't. Looking for a bur to drown our disappointment we bumped into a theater. Kathleen checked at the box office: they still had tickets (£20 for the 1st row – cheap because you had to look up, and £40 for some other seats) but we still decided against going.

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It took awhile but we did finally find a bar with a table looking out onto the street up near Convent Gardens where we enjoyed a few Kroonenberg's and watched the Saturday night crowd walk and drive by (the walkers seemed to be moving quicker than the traffic).

Passed several Mediterranean buffets on the way that looked (and smelled) delicious. Tempting as they were we decided to enjoy our last dinner at Belgo Central. There was the usual crowd of people waiting, and we were told it would be 90 minutes before we would be seated, but we were sitting at our bench 30 minutes later. Talked while we were waiting with a Korean couple from New York: she told us that there was a Belgo Central in Manhattan!

Dinner was superb! I had duck and Kathleen has a Filet. Between the filet and our beef at Simpsons we have decided that things are improving beef-wise in London. Her steak was really good!

The couple next to us were both young teachers in England. They really feel that the schools have gone downhill since they came through, mainly because the schools can't/won't discipline students any more. He went to college in Manchester: said there was a Belgo Central there too.

Took the tube to Green Park and got off to walk past Buckingham Palace to pay our respects to the Queen. Talked to a very drunk Brit about George Bush, Tony Blair and other worldly matters for a few minutes before heading off in search of Victoria Station. They apparently had moved it since we were last there, as it took us a while to find it. We then spent even more time trying to find the #24 bus stop before finding the tube station entrance and (eventually) getting back to the hotel at 11:30.

28 Nov 2004 – Sunday

London

Got up at 6:00 (going home sucks!) and went through the packing ordeal (packing to go home sucks too). Checked out and walked sadly through the rain to catch the tube to Victoria Station.

We expected our 7-day travel cards to work (since we bought them at 9:30) but didn't need them to get in since the baggage gate was open. Had a 10 minute wait, but got to Victoria OK only to discover that the cards did not work! Luckily, somebody opened the luggage gate there too, so we got away with one!

Caught the 7:45 train to Gatwick (I think that is the same time we caught the train into London last Sunday!) to begin our long trip home.

Got to the airport terminal at 8:30 (for a 10:05 flight), only to face a very long check-in line. Fortunately they pulled all of the Dallas-bound passengers out of the line and let us go ahead, so that went quickly. The plane was completely full, so there was no chance of improving our seats.

Tried to find the lost luggage area to see if they had my jacket but gave up trying to find the room in frustration (it was downstairs someplace). Had just enough time (and change) for a cup of coffee and small breakfast before boarding the plane.

It was a bit cooler than the trip over, but only wearing a T-shirt turned out to be a good plan!

The flight was long. Left at 10:15 and arrived in Dallas 10 hours later. On the way I ate my first Bangers and Mash (sausage and mashed potatoes), but not by choice. By the time they got around to serving us they had run out of Chicken (imagine that!). Kathleen told the stewardess "I can't eat that!" and got a vegetarian plate instead, but I gave it a try. It was actually pretty good.

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Landed about 2:30, got our luggage and cleared customs without any problems and made it home by 4:30 or so, tired (but rested) and thoroughly happy we had gone!