

TOURIST OR TRAVELER:  
AN EXPLORATION OF CREATIVE  
NONFICTION TRAVEL WRITING

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	1
Project Introduction.....	2
A Background of Travel Writing.....	3
Blog Compilation.....	17
Creative Piece.....	90
Project Reflection and Analysis.....	108

## Acknowledgements

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## Project Introduction

This project revolved around the completion of a personal creative nonfiction travel writing piece. In order to properly complete this endeavor, several components were necessary.

A large component of any nonfiction writing is research. In order to give more scope into my project, I incorporated a research element into the world of travel writing. I wanted the focus of this project to be why people travel: what motivates or hinders them? Is it societal pressures, or something personal? I felt understanding the evolution of travel writing was crucial to my understanding and expression of this component.

Another component consisted of blogs I kept while abroad. As this project was spread out over a longer period of time, I wanted something to document my experiences which might later create a larger story. It also was a way in which I could further test and refine my approach to the craft. This, if you will, is the ‘data’ I gathered over time before drawing conclusions.

When finally deciding upon my final piece, I knew I wanted it to be something concerning the above mentioned themes: motivation for travel, personal experience, and overarching experiences. Despite the wide breadth of experiences I had, I knew choosing scenes and a storyline would be dictated by places to which I traveled where I found these elements to be the strongest.

Lastly, I included a reflection—how I approached each step of the process, and where it eventually left me in relation to the future. Therefore, with this roadmap to my personal journey with travel writing, my project begins.

## A Background of Travel Writing

Travel writing is a broad genre, constituting everything from guide books to personal memoirs. At some point it becomes questionable where we draw the line—for what point or purpose must a story be written in order for it to be considered travel writing. Michel de Certeau, a French theorist, believes that ‘every story is a travel story’.<sup>1</sup> While perhaps a frustrating notion on a base level, this idea allows us to consider that travel writing is a way of not just detailing separate geographies, but also to speak of a personal journey through a culture, or through oneself. Travel, then, we realize is two-fold. First, it is through the physical world, and second, through an ideological sphere. But beyond this understanding, the purpose behind such journeys must be asked. Holland and Huggan assert that travel writing acts as a ‘useful vehicle of cultural self-perception’.<sup>2</sup> ‘There are no foreign peoples with whom we do not share a common humanity...all travel requires us to negotiate...between alterity and identity, difference and similarity’.<sup>3</sup> It could be argued, then, that this pursuit of cultural understanding is what drives individuals to examine the particulars of the world so closely.<sup>4</sup> Pinpointing the motivation even further, as Cocker observes, ‘travel is one of the greatest doors to human freedom, and the travel book is a medium through which humans celebrate this freedom’.<sup>5</sup> At a time of increasing

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<sup>1</sup> De Certeau, Michel, ‘Spatial Stories’, in *Defining Travel: Diverse Visions*, ed. by Susan L. Roberson (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2001), pp.89

<sup>2</sup> Holland, Patrick, and Graham Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), pp. xiii

<sup>3</sup> Thompson, Carl, *Travel Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 9

<sup>4</sup> Duncan, James S, and Derek Gregory, *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 1

<sup>5</sup> Cocker, Mark, *Loneliness and Time: British Travel Writing in the Twentieth Century*, (London: Secker and Warburg, 1992), pp. 260

globalization where much of the world is increasingly accessible, we still find individuals relishing in travel writing, whatever the style may be, because it is a way to understand current world ideologies and differences yet on a deeper level, negotiate a freedom through an understanding of sameness of the human condition.

Learning the origins of travel writing is useful in understanding how the genre has transformed into what we recognize in the modern day. Interestingly enough, travel writing was conceived from very practical purposes. Even during ancient times, travel was undertaken for war or trade, among other reasons, and often these journeys required documentation.<sup>6</sup> Although previously of oral tradition, the classically famous, *The Odyssey*, is a work mostly concerned with the travels during Odysseus's epic journey. Biblical passages, like the Exodus, are also excellent examples of ancient texts detailing the movement of individuals.<sup>7</sup>

During Medieval times, travel was documented during pilgrimages to the Holy Land or Rome (such as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*).<sup>8</sup> Medieval travelogues were also concerned with the chivalrous errands of knights, such as undertaking quests for his Queen.<sup>9</sup> Because these kinds of travels were focused on a particular goal, and were often accompanied by strong emotions or hardships, the documentations were often quite detailed and faithful.<sup>10</sup>

Early modern travel writing, as we know it, stemmed largely from the European tradition. As voyages to expand European empires began, so did more extensive empirical documentation. Christopher Columbus, in his voyages, was particularly keen on accumulating facts concerned

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<sup>6</sup> Thompson, Carl, *Travel Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 35

<sup>7</sup> Thompson, Carl, *Travel Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 36

<sup>8</sup> Thompson, Carl, *Travel Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 38

<sup>9</sup> Thompson, Carl, *Travel Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 174

<sup>10</sup> Sherman, William, 'Stirrings and searchings (1500-1720)', in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. By Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 25

with his travels.<sup>11</sup> Other explorers were in pursuit of trade or economic endeavours, and focused on the geographical and physical traits in their travels, so as to accurately create maps for future travel routes.<sup>12</sup>

Up until this time, travel might have been seen as a ‘necessary evil’ to complete one’s tasks.<sup>13</sup> However, with increasing European imperialization (namely that of the English), travel writing began focusing more on cultural observations. After the ascension of Queen Victoria, the ‘Grand Tour’ was initiated—a concept which encouraged young men to explore the European continent in hopes of enriching their education. At this point, we see a crucial shift from the importance of the function of a travelogue, to the importance placed on travelling itself.<sup>14</sup> This was also the time that the term ‘tourist’ came to be, thus showing that the idea that an individual might travel just for the sake of traveling.<sup>15</sup> Due to the high volume of European travelers, either for tourism or expansion purposes, much of the early modern travel writing is seen through a European lens. As Anders Sparrman in *A Voyage to Good Hope* notes, ‘Every authentic and well-written book of...travels is, in fact, a treatise of experimental philosophy’.<sup>16</sup> Thus, we begin to see the emergence of a concept often found in travel writing; that of ‘the other’.

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<sup>11</sup> Thompson, Carl, *Travel Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 41

<sup>12</sup> Bridges, Roy, ‘Exploration and travel outside Europe (1720-1914)’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. By Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 55

<sup>13</sup> Duncan, James S, and Derek Gregory, *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 6

<sup>14</sup> Buzard, James, ‘The Grand Tour and after (1600-1840)’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 38

<sup>15</sup> Thompson, Carl, *Travel Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 47

<sup>16</sup> Sparrman, Anders, *A Voyage to the Cape of Good Hope, Towards the Antarctic Polar Circle, Round the World and to the Country of the Hottentots and the Caffres, from the Year 1772-1776* (London, 1785), pp. iii-iv

Naturally, when writing of one's viewpoint of the world, the work assumes a certain position, and therefore pivots the rest of the world against that viewpoint. In a general sense, this form of 'othering' simply notes differences between one culture and another. However, it can also be used in another sense, in which one culture might be seen as superior to another. Edward Said famously talks of this; in particular, the notion of Orientalism. He claims that Orientalism is 'a closed field, a theatrical state affixed to Europe'<sup>17</sup> wherein Eastern culture is feminized and depicted as lazy, overly sexual, or passive.<sup>18</sup> The critique here is that this early modern travel writing exerts 'symbolic or psychological mastery over the people and places', which, in turn allows for much of the tradition of travel writing to be enmeshed in perhaps a style which exerts Western superiority by assumption of greater cultural significance.<sup>19,20</sup> If used improperly or aggressively, this technique might assert a tone of cultural superiority; however, most often in modern times it is employed as a tool to engage on a deeper understanding and enjoyment of cultures, something vital to travel writing today.

The era of the Grand Tour might be marked as a purpose for self-cultivation for individuals or as what is deemed as egocentric ideas of experiencing civilized culture, yet it also marked a turn in the purpose of travel writing.<sup>21</sup> After the revelation that travel itself can be for pleasure, the notion manifested that travel writing, in turn, can also not just be for information, but for pleasure.<sup>22</sup> It was at this time that the genera begin to see a Romanticization, wherein the

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<sup>17</sup> Said, Edward, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1979), pp. 63

<sup>18</sup> Thompson, Carl, *Travel Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 178

<sup>19</sup> Thompson, Carl, *Travel Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 155

<sup>20</sup> Campbell, Mary Baine, 'Travel writing and its theory', in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 269

<sup>21</sup> Gilroy, Amanda, *Romantic Geographies: Discourses of Travel, 1775-1844*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 2

<sup>22</sup> Thompson, Carl, *Travel Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 45

writing itself was meant to please the reader.<sup>23</sup> Often, landscapes were described in picturesque ways, with a focus on the accompanying sentimental or emotional journeys a travel might undertake in connection to experiencing an unfamiliar sight or land.<sup>24,25</sup> ‘From the late eighteenth century onwards, then, travel writing starts to look inwards as well as outwards’.<sup>26</sup>

Between World War One and World War Two, we see some travel writing that exhibits a sort of ‘world-weariness’ at the possible discouraging effects of globalization, and a ‘disillusionment with European civilisation’ which was once held so highly in travel writing.<sup>27</sup> At this time, nationalistic attitudes had developed, with focus on differing identities and ideologies.<sup>28</sup> However, after World War Two, travel writing begins to be seen as a way to negotiate past the physical boundaries possibly drawn through war. At this time, travel writing entered its ‘golden age’<sup>29</sup> as it was also finally seen as a respectable literary career.<sup>30</sup>

From this point in history onward, we can begin to consider works to be of modern travel writing. It is somewhat harder now to distinguish between the purposes and styles of various travel writings, or indeed, differentiate where content and style remain autonomous of one another. Instead, we are increasingly seeing a blending of techniques.

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<sup>23</sup> Duncan, James S, and Derek Gregory, *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 6

<sup>24</sup> Buzard, James, ‘The Grand Tour and after (1600-1840)’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 45

<sup>25</sup> Thompson, Carl, *Travel Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 49

<sup>26</sup> Thompson, Carl, *Travel Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 111

<sup>27</sup> Carr, Helen, ‘Modernism and travel (1880-1940)’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 81

<sup>28</sup> Carr, Helen, ‘Modernism and travel (1880-1940)’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 73

<sup>29</sup> Thompson, Carl, *Travel Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 58

<sup>30</sup> Hulme, Peter, ‘Travelling to write (1940-2000)’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 89

Perhaps the most well known of modern travel writings are guidebooks. Obviously, these words provide useful empirical information about places for the aspiring tourist. However, the dry rhetoric and focus on data-like details hardly exhibit the ways the genre has evolved. By romanticizing areas (such as the beauty and high level of attraction to a site such as the Eiffel Tower) or possibly highlighting dangers of travelling to an impoverished nation, it could be said that these travel guides are still presenting the world through a lens and therefore allowing a supposedly objective work to be undermined by residual feelings of Western egocentricism and lingering fear or aversion to ‘the other’.<sup>31</sup> The other criticism might be that these sorts of travel writings see cultures ‘almost as living fossils’<sup>32</sup> and are shallowly prejudicial.<sup>33</sup> The draw behind highlighting famous tourist attractions might be to persuade an individual to witness an historical event as it was before our time of globalization, to create a feeling of the exotic once more. It might be argued that the purpose behind travel guides is to perpetuate cultural understanding by encouraging individuals to experience the world for their selves. However, by presenting other cultures in a somewhat familiar way, it only enables the ‘tourist gaze’, wherein individuals are not really travelling for a deeper meaning other than to witness what has already been deemed as important.<sup>34,35</sup>

Stepping away from the impersonal, we see writings where, ‘travel experience is ...crafted into travel text’<sup>36</sup> and authors write from the view of a tourist, documenting physical details while still employing literary techniques such as voice or imagery in hopes of engaging the reader’s emotions and creating a sense of authenticity.

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<sup>31</sup> Thompson, Carl, *Travel Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 96, 133, 137

<sup>32</sup> Thompson, Carl, *Travel Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 147

<sup>33</sup> Thompson, Carl, *Travel Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 96

<sup>34</sup> Thompson, Carl, *Travel Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 161

<sup>35</sup> Peckham, Robert Shannan, ‘The Exoticism of the Familiar and the Familiarity of the Exotic’, in *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing*, ed. by Duncan, James S, and Derek Gregory (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 164

<sup>36</sup> Thompson, Carl, *Travel Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 27

Such an example of this is Bill Bryson's, *Notes From a Small Island*. In this work, Bryson details a sort of farewell tour he takes around Britain, after having lived there for about 20 years, before going back to America. He details his journeys across England, Scotland, and Wales as somewhat of a comedic wandering, despite it having a clear personal purpose. The prologue immediately allows the reader to understand that while he will be focusing on cultural observations, he is writing in his personalized, satirical and sarcastic manner for a greater purpose.<sup>37</sup>

Bryson notes several dry facts that give evidence to how life has changed since he first came to Britain, such as the inflation of the pound and how much it cost to buy household items.<sup>38</sup> But he also measures the change by more humorous marks, such as the difference in the current news with that year, where Britain 'went to war with Iceland over cod (albeit in a mercifully wimpy, put-down-those-whitefish-or-we-might –just-shoot-across-your-bow sort of way).'<sup>3940</sup> Throughout the book, these patterns continue. He constantly documents the routes he takes from one city to another, or what accommodation in particular he stays at. Yet throughout, he maintains a distinct humorous voice, complaining about small annoyances, or remarking about particular observations.<sup>41</sup> Often, we find these elements intertwining with what we might feel are the necessary empirical facts of guide books, but altered through the style in which it is written. For instance, when musing about Communism Bryson writes of the British:

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<sup>37</sup> Tonkin, Boyd, 'Notes from a Small Island', *New Statesman Society*, 8.370 (1995), pp.34

<sup>38</sup> Bryson, Bill, *Notes from a Small Island* (New York: Morrow, 1996).

<sup>39</sup> Hulme, Peter, 'Travelling to write (1940-2000)', in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 94

<sup>40</sup> Bryson, Bill, *Notes from a Small Island* (New York: Morrow, 1996).

<sup>41</sup> Cahill, Tom, 'Notes from a Small Island, Bill Bryson: Book review', *BootsnAll.com*, <<http://www.bootsnall.com/reviews/feb02bryson.shtml>> [accessed 28 March 2012]

‘For a start, they like going without. They are great at pulling together, particularly in the face of adversity, for perceived common good. They will queue patiently for indefinite periods and accept with rare fortitude the imposition of rationing, bland diets and sudden inconvenient shortages of staple goods, as anyone who has ever looked for bread at a supermarket on a Saturday afternoon will know...They are comfortable with faceless bureaucracies and, as Mrs. Thatcher proved, tolerant of dictatorships. They will wait uncomplainingly for years for an operation or the delivery of a household appliance. They have a natural gift for making excellent jokes about authority without seriously challenging it, and they derive universal satisfaction from the sight of the rich and powerful brought low’.<sup>42</sup>

Here, we do learn facts about the British culture, such as shopping habits, past political leaders, what humor is viewed as funny, and even the simple fact that being orderly in a queue is important. Yet Bryson delivers all of this knowledge in a somewhat alternative method. In this case, this type of literature is a sort of in-between from guide books and memoirs. Bryson is admitting to being a tourist, and therefore writes of specific information.<sup>43</sup> However, due to the personal viewpoint, we gain much more entertainment.<sup>44</sup>

Yet, this sort of writing presents difficulties. As it is strictly from a personal experience, certain facts may be lacking. For those unfamiliar with the British geography, perhaps a ‘guidebook’ lacking any formal map or directions would indeed be confusing.<sup>45</sup> It also might be said that it focuses too much on areas of particular personal significance, but maybe not on larger

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<sup>42</sup> Bryson, Bill, *Notes from a Small Island* (New York: Morrow, 1996).

<sup>43</sup> Thompson, Carl, *Travel Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 126

<sup>44</sup> ‘Bill Bryson Interview’. [BBC.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk),

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/norfolk/content/articles/2005/09/02/sop\\_countywide\\_bill\\_bryson\\_heritage\\_feature.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/norfolk/content/articles/2005/09/02/sop_countywide_bill_bryson_heritage_feature.shtml) [accessed 28 March 2012]

<sup>45</sup> Boaz, Amy, ‘Notes from a Small Island: An Affectionate Portrait of Britain’, *Library Journal*, 121.6 (1996), pp. 105

destinations which may be more traditional to tourists.<sup>46</sup> Also, while being humorous, one might argue that writing of such generalizations, as seen above, will only perpetuate stereotypes.

However, these writings are given more license as they are meant to be creative.

Currently, we are finding that travel writing is focusing on the personal even more than Bryson does. ‘As the earth’s wildernesses get paved over, travel writing increasingly emphasizes the inner journey’ as opposed to merely the conquering of a physical travel.<sup>4748</sup> In these writings, we find that the author often undergoes a sort of mental journey in their transformation or understanding of personal culture or identity in relation to their physical travels.<sup>49</sup> Often, it seems, this journey was spurred on by some feeling that by travelling, one could find something in the world which they could not find at home.<sup>5051</sup> These personal accounts mirror the thinking that the drive behind travelling is a sort of personal desire. Again and again, we see writings as an account towards ‘growing self-knowledge and self-realisation’.<sup>52</sup>

This style of travel writing tests the boundaries we see drawn throughout the world and question, if you will, the myths attributed to them.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, as we travel from one place to

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<sup>46</sup> Cahill, Tom, ‘Notes from a Small Island, Bill Bryson: Book review’, BootsAll.com, <<http://www.bootsnall.com/reviews/feb02bryson.shtml>> [accessed 28 March 2012]

<sup>47</sup> Hulme, Peter, ‘Travelling to write (1940-2000)’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 94

<sup>48</sup> Sharp, Joanne, P, ‘Writing over the Map of Provence: The touristic therapy of *A Year in Provence*’, in *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing*, ed. by Duncan, James S, and Derek Gregory (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 200

<sup>49</sup> Thompson, Carl, *Travel Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 99

<sup>50</sup> Carr, Helen, ‘Modernism and travel (1880-1940)’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 83

<sup>51</sup> Bassnett, Susan, ‘Travel writing and gender’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 234

<sup>52</sup> Thompson, Carl, *Travel Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 98, 114

<sup>53</sup> McMillin, Laurie Hovell, ‘Enlightenment Travels: The making of epiphany in Tibet’, in *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing*, by Duncan, James S, and Derek Gregory (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 49

another, we often feel as though we take a little bit of each place with us, and as we cross these boundaries, we might ‘blur distinctions between home and away’.<sup>54</sup>

In his work, *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls, and the Search for Home*, Pico Iyer writes of the idea of being a ‘global citizen’. Iyer is of Indian heritage, grew up traveling between America and England, and settled in Japan. His work explores what it means to have differing identities, but also how they mould together to form an entirely different one.

While his writing details his personal stories, it is not solely focused on the personal impact of his journeys. Instead, Iyer writes of ‘social criticism and political and philosophical analysis...and very little cultural stereotyping’.<sup>55</sup> The purpose behind what cultural details he does include might be because of his desire to translate the importance of experiencing something firsthand. Iyer writes, ‘Travel is how we...step a little beyond our secondhand images of the alien. All the information in the world on our flashing or high-definition screens cannot begin to convey the feel and smell, the human truth, of another culture.’<sup>56</sup>

This brings in the idea that travel writing, indeed is a form of informing and educating the world. Yet here, Iyer admits that it is still a second form of media, one that very well can hold its own biases or even inadvertent prejudices. Therefore, by creating literature such as this, it might be possible to inspire individuals to travel on their own, to explore this common desire. Iyer also says by pursuing this sort of global soul, one that recognizes an identity in many cultures,

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<sup>54</sup> Phillips, Richard, ‘Writing Travel and Mapping Sexuality’, in *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing*, ed. by Duncan, James S, and Derek Gregory (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 84

<sup>55</sup> Houissa, Ali, ‘The global soul: Jet lag, shopping malls, and the search for home’, *Library Journal*, 125.1 (2000), pp. 139

<sup>56</sup> Iyer, Pico, ‘The Necessity of Travel’, *Time International (Canada Edition)*, 159.21 (2002), pp. 68

‘reminds us that we are joined not only by our habits and our urges and our fears, but also by our dreams and the best part of us that intuits an identity larger than you or I’.<sup>57</sup>

Sometimes, this sort of idealist human understanding is not always the reality. However, if we look to fiction, we can at times, see this urge represented, for ‘fiction shows...us life as it should be’.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, we might say that in novels or other fiction with travel writing, they are projecting the reality of cultural understanding that the traveler desires. In Hemingway’s, *The Sun Also Rises*, we follow specific events in a character’s personal life that lead to a wider understanding of their identity and how they fit in with the world.

Although fiction, Hemingway’s writing exhibits characteristics found in other travel writing, such as vivid descriptions. For example, in describing the fiesta he states that ‘people had been coming in all day from the country, but they were assimilated in the town and you did not notice them. The square was as quiet in the hot sun as on any other day. The peasants were in the outlying wine-shops. There they were drinking, getting ready for the fiesta’.<sup>59</sup> These sorts of details would be important in describing a travelling destination. But as the work is fiction, Hemingway weaves in the descriptions instead of making them the focus, placing the importance rather on the symbolic tie between travelling and the characters.

At the beginning of the novel, the characters feel separated by their differences. Although all expatriates who have ‘lost touch with the soil’,<sup>60</sup> Jake and his friends frequently

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<sup>57</sup> Iyer, Pico, ‘Are We Coming Apart or Together?’, *Time*, 155.21 (2000), pp. 114

<sup>58</sup> Phillips, Richard, ‘Writing Travel and Mapping Sexuality’, in *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing*, ed. by Duncan, James S, and Derek Gregory (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 80

<sup>59</sup> Hemingway, Ernest, *The Sun Also Rises* (New York: Scribner, 1954), pp. 152

<sup>60</sup> Hemingway, Ernest, *The Sun Also Rises* (New York: Scribner, 1954), pp. 115

comment on their dislike for tourists, or ponder whether a new acquaintance is ‘one of us’<sup>61 62 63</sup> Here, they are denying that they themselves are foreign in their host culture. Also, Robert is frequently ostracized for being Jewish, and Brett tells Jake she cannot be with him due to his injury. This injury is a war-wound, something which might symbolize in turn, the crippling effect that conflict and misunderstanding between differing cultures might have on an individual.

While mostly Hemingway writes in a somewhat detached tone, it is apparent to the reader that the issues present in the novel significantly affect the characters. For example, Robert remarks, ‘Don’t you ever get the feeling that all your life is going by and you’re not taking advantage of it?’<sup>64</sup> This feeling of loss of knowing one’s purpose in life drives the characters to undertake a journey.

In Spain, we see a major shift in the character’s self-realization. After diving in San Sebastian, Jake reaches ‘a moment of truth, an epiphany that allows him to see his life objectively and to change’.<sup>65</sup> Perhaps what is important here is the connection to the physical world. Jake has this revelation in connection with the natural world while on a trip. Therefore, it might be argued that it is the new land which allows Jake to discover identity. Also, the characters claim that ‘nobody ever lives their life all the way up except bull fighters’,<sup>66</sup> and they place great significance on the dangerous tasks that Romero, a bull fighter, accomplishes. This might symbolize the characters desire to experience a different culture, as well as a draw to the

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<sup>61</sup> Hemingway, Ernest, *The Sun Also Rises* (New York: Scribner, 1954), pp. 32

<sup>62</sup> Bradley, Jacqueline, ‘Hemingway's the Sun Also Rises’, *The Explicator*, 64.4 (2006), p 231

<sup>63</sup> Tomkins, David, ‘The "lost Generation" and the Generation of Loss: Ernest Hemingway's Materiality of Absence and the Sun Also Rises’, *Mfs Modern Fiction Studies*, 54.4 (2009), 749

<sup>64</sup> Hemingway, Ernest, *The Sun Also Rises* (New York: Scribner, 1954), pp. 11

<sup>65</sup> Knodt, Ellen, ‘Diving Deep: Jake’s moment of truth at San Sebastian. (‘The Sun Also Rises’)', *The Hemingway Review*. 17.1. (1997), pp. 28

<sup>66</sup> Hemingway, Ernest, *The Sun Also Rises* (New York: Scribner, 1954), pp. 10

traditionally fearful unknown. However, after they travel to Spain, and experience the festival, they seem to come to an understanding with one another and their selves. Hemingway writes that Jake ‘rubbed the rod-case through the dust. It seemed the last thing that connected me with Spain and the fiesta’.<sup>67</sup> No more are the characters engaged in the vibrant life associated with the new land. Rather, they now feel separate self-realization in what the land had offered them in the past. Despite being fiction, we as readers still go on an empathetic travel to a new land, and possibly to a new cultural or personal realization.

Obviously, this sort of travel writing differs greatly from that of medieval travelogues, or even modern guide books. Yet, the important aspect to consider is not what lies within the stylistic differences, but the similarities in their purposes. Throughout the travel writing tradition, we see that the purpose is to ‘bring news of the wider world, and to disseminate information about unfamiliar peoples and places’.<sup>68</sup> It is, by its nature, a translation between what is seen and what is desired.<sup>6970</sup>

Travel writing is always ‘a product of a particular time and a particular culture’.<sup>71</sup> Thus, historically, the styles and content of what is included varies greatly. No doubt in several years time, we will see a drastic difference in the nature of travel writing. Blogs are increasingly popular because of their ease of publication and access. However, with such instant publication, it once again pushes the boundary between ‘public and private communication’ as well as

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<sup>67</sup> Hemingway, Ernest, *The Sun Also Rises* (New York: Scribner, 1954), pp. 232

<sup>68</sup> Thompson, Carl, *Travel Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 63

<sup>69</sup> Duncan, James S, and Derek Gregory, *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 4

<sup>70</sup> Brown, Michael, ‘Travelling through the Closet’, in *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing*, ed. by Duncan, James S, and Derek Gregory (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 185

<sup>71</sup> Bassnett, Susan, ‘Travel writing and gender’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 239

volume of distribution and perhaps will fundamentally alter individuals' engagement with reading of cultures and responding to their own travels.<sup>72</sup>

However, despite these differences of past or present, fact or fiction, a common thread we see throughout all travel writing is that seemingly innate desire in humans to travel and gain understanding of their own and differing cultures and connect on a certain level with all of humanity; but even further we see an underlying hope for the freedom gained by the attainment of global empathy.

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<sup>72</sup> Thompson, Carl, *Travel Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 61

## Blog Compilation

\*Note: Photograph Gallery, Videos, and other interactive media were excluded in order to maintain an orderly format. Full content of blog is available at:

<http://whereivewandered.tumblr.com>

### July 30, 2011

I'm a planner. At least, I plan for the big events in my life. I was the kid who would start looking in May for material to make my Halloween costume's pseudo-SWAT vest. Another confession—I'm very aware of details. Not obsessively so, but I used to assume it was natural for everyone to register the injustice when a Pizza Roll package would only come with 14 bites of cheesy goodness when it was clearly marked as a 15 count.

My preparations for studying abroad started about a full year ago, when one day my little brother wanted me to watch Harry Potter with him. During a scene where platters of desserts were laid out, he turned to me and said, "Wouldn't it be cool if you could eat a mountain of tripe tarts in England?" Bless his little enthusiastic, middle school heart; I think he was just a tad bit confused. But yes, I knew where he was coming from.

After that, the thought of studying abroad began to slowly simmer in my brain. I hadn't quite made up my mind about where I wanted to go. That involved many websites, brochures, pamphlets, and conversations with friends that included varying occurrences of, "Oh my God, look at that. You could be standing there. Or THERE!"

This haphazard scheming eventually led to the decision to study in Wales. Once this major choice was made, I found myself freed up to ruminate on more specific details. My overly

attentive personality was perfect for this. Of course I was excited by the wonderful irony of taking an American foreign policy course as an American in a foreign country. However, I was also hung up on things like what to do if I lost my Club Sporty Card. Did it really matter that I had not yet signed up to join a club sport? This was vital information.

Naturally, all of this tunnel vision took up most of what was left of my brain capacity after everything else that was going on in my life. But after months of preparations, for the first time, I am faced with a new sensation: I have no more planning left to do. At least, I've adequately prepared everything I can until my actual arrival at the university. So this left my brain with a gap. What should it fixate on, now that all of the practical matters were taken care of?

I wanted to *want* something. I found myself hoping for a goal of what to see, who to meet, and what to accomplish while I was abroad.

And then, I realized I was glad I had none of those.

I'm not looking for an itinerary; if I wanted one of those I'd go to a travel agency. Sometimes it's overwhelming taking all the baggage that comes along with forming expectations about a place, and I'd rather fill my luggage with clothes, or possibly a guidebook tucked away just in case.

As it gets closer for me to leave, I'm excited knowing that what I'm hoping to gain isn't necessarily particular details that could be checked off a list, but rather just expecting the country to offer up some good old, unedited culture. When my overactive brain tries to get me to start planning again, I mentally chuck those tendencies out, picturing them in some dumpster like the evidence of a dirty affair. I don't want to over-think this.

I just want to know how cool it is to eat a mountain of tripe tarts.

**July 30, 2011**

**‘But that’s the glory of foreign travel, as far as I am concerned. I don’t want to know what people are talking about. I can’t think of anything that excites a greater sense of childlike wonder than to be in a country where you are ignorant of almost everything. Suddenly you are five years old again. You can’t read anything, you have only the most rudimentary sense of how things work, you can’t even reliably cross a street without endangering your life. Your whole existence becomes a series of interesting guesses.’**

— Bill Bryson *Neither Here nor There: Travels in Europe*

**September 13, 2011**

There’s a plant quite ubiquitous in the Southeastern United States called kudzu. This species of vegetation was brought to the US from Japan at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. Gardeners thought this to be a novel decorative addition, conservationists and it was found to even aid in prevention of soil erosion. Furthermore, it grows well in hot, humid conditions, so it spread very successfully. After a while, it became apparent that it was fairly resistant against various removal methods. So voila, fast-forward to present day where the kudzu’s creeping, invasive presence isn’t going anywhere.

I spent the summer in Georgia with my parents, so I’ve encountered this thick viney blanket sprawling over trees, power lines, an anything else in its path quite frequently.

This trip has kudzued my life in the past few weeks.

Thoughts about going to Wales have slowly been sneaking up to me, digging their tendrils deep in my brain, until now I feel that my brain has become completely enveloped in a network of vining Wales-related thoughts. If I were at my home university, I would have been in classes for almost a month now, almost everyone else I know studying abroad has already left for their host universities. So it's hard for me NOT to think about my school.

Or at least, things related to where my school is. I go to bed and dream of fish and chips, and wake up wondering why I had never learned more about the British government. It's amazing that I'm still finding new things to Google (at least 3 a day). Late at night, I tell myself this is normal. With only about a week left until I arrive, I have become completely and unashamedly obsessed with this trip.

But I'm fine with my preoccupation. In fact, I'm completely delighted with my kudzued brain.

### **September 26, 2011**

To say I'm tired is a major understatement.

The trip over was much like what one would expect from crossing several thousand miles—I got served not one but TWO airline meals (oh, Delta, from where does this generosity come from?), my bags were naturally one of the last out on the carousel, and there were several screaming babies that made me question the cost/benefit ratio of producing offspring. There were several major differences in this journey, though. Even though it was a red-eye flight and beyond, I didn't snatch every opportunity for some sleep. I had a very enjoyable flight buddy (probably a first) and proved it's possible to make a friend in under 8 hours. And when I was

waiting for my bus to come, I met some other very wonderful stranded students (a sure recipe for bonding). By the time my bus arrived, I had been awake for over 24 hrs, but I was loving that I was finally in the UK. I commend the driver on his excellent radio choice, and ability to navigate down miniscule country roads at speeds better suited for highways. Despite dark scenery and exhaustion, I was determined to keep my eyes alert for lush fields, Welsh signs, and charming little towns as Adele warbled in the background.

I took most of the day Saturday to go into town for bedding and other necessary items (yes, my caramel chocolate Lion cereal was just as important for a late night snack but also its awesome name). Sunday the lovely staff of the international student center put together a welcome for us students, giving me opportunity to stress about actual academic-related things. I *somehow* keep forgetting I'm actually here for classroom learning as well. Another trip into town was called for; I made the excuse it was because I forgot contact solution, but honestly, the real reason was the sea. Now, I've been to the ocean many times, but I've never actually lived in such a quaint seaside civilization.

Even if I lived here for ten more years, I don't think I would ever become less impacted by the surrounding beauty. A friend and I spent the afternoon walking up to castle ruins and along the rocks on the beach. It was quite literally a breathtaking experience; a secret to why one is able to eat copious amounts of fish and chips and maintain their ability to be differentiated from a manatee is all the walking.

With a belly full of bacon toasties and bean jacket potatoes, I feel it would be an opportune time to sleep, but sadly, my dear friend Jet Lag has other plans. It's amazing how tired I've been, but unable to sleep. At moments in these past two days, the exhaustion has been

utterly overwhelming. But it's still satisfying, because I know it's from several very fulfilling days.

I've been settling in well, on the whole, even if there are a million other details to attend to. Classes are due to start soon, and I know then I'll be getting even busier. But for now, I feel that even if I don't remember a bit of my lessons this semester, my cultural learning will more than make up for it.

### **September 28, 2011**

Often, I think Americans view Britons as very proper and reserved individuals. This might be true on some accounts—I can't emphasize enough how tickled I am every time someone exhibits proper manners and holds a door open for me, then says, 'Cheers' when I thank them. But each day I'm here, I continue to witness that this is a culture much more accepting, and even loving, of eccentricities. Yes, Americans pride themselves on being 'individuals', but the sheer number of uniform Uggs and Northface at my home university would say otherwise. I love the unabashed way males will don man-capris and man-purses, without the faintest whiff of embarrassment. Girls routinely wear dresses one might only see during Halloween in the US. And you know what? They pull it off. Accents are not consistent. Kate Nash enthusiasts are just as equally enthralled with Celtic Thunder. A few Welsh words get thrown into English conversations and vice-versa.

I've been meeting many international students this week, from Germany, France, Canada, Poland, and onward. It's still fairly easy to pick out where someone is from after a moment or two based on their language or fashion. But what's interesting to me is that amidst all of these

eclectic British citizens, international individuals seem to just add to the flavor of it all. We all bring our quirks and habits, and become incorporated with a people who seem to want anything but a homogeneous populous.

### **September 29, 2011**

I'm beginning to fully appreciate that it will never be a dull day at Aberystwyth University.

This past week has been overwhelming with scheduling and other academic related issues, mainly because the UK system is, of course, very different than ours. Apparently it isn't as common for students here to take classes outside of their department, so it requires a lot of running around to authorize classes in different subjects. Also, classes I thought I would take aren't being offered, etc. So all in all—a minor headache. In addition to getting the runaround, I've literally been running around. I can't seem to go a day without making a trip into town, and being the wonderfully coordinated person I am, I've somehow sprained part of my foot. So last night, exhausted from details and exercise, I decided to turn in early. Aber had different plans for me.

Around 9:30 the piercing wail of the fire alarm beckoned us all outside. Being the first week of the semester, I naturally figured that it was a practice drill. It turns out that some lovely individuals had decided to stuff loofahs and other items down sinks and stopper up tubs in bathrooms on two floors of our halls. Water had flooded through CONCRETE floors, and even had managed to find its way into electrical components and our fire alarm system. Naturally this caused all kinds of ruckus, and electricians, police, heads of the accommodation office, came

out. The issue was so severe that we had to travel to a different hall of residence, and sit in a common room for six hours while things got sorted out. Suffice it to say that things were *interesting* at 3am after the bars had closed and eighteen-year-old adult-children returned to pass out/yell/spill Pepsi.

The silver lining though, was that I actually met several fun people. Connected by boredom and mutual hatred for the perpetrators, we found an unending supply of things to talk about, and I wound up with a few more buddies than I would have otherwise. The incident also allowed the very calm and pleasant side of British culture to come out. I swear, had it been the states, residents would have been on the prowl to find those responsible, and all but ready to lynch them. There would have been rebelling and whining, and a general stampede when several water pitchers were brought. But no, here it was subdued chaos. There were spouts of noise, but on the whole, students respected the wardens and police, and when we were finally released to go back to our rooms, we were not yelled at, but rather apologized by to the head of housing ‘on behalf of our fellow disappointing students responsible for this episode’.

But after all of this, on top of my week, I was completely sleep-deprived. The sun didn’t care, and came up anyway, greeting me with another packed day.

Today I was lucky enough to travel to Devils Bridge Falls, one of Mid-Wales well-known landmarks, through a trip that the International Student Center was kind enough to arrange for us all. The story behind the bridge is a charming one. Way back in the 11th Century, the Devil traveled to Wales because of its extensive beauty, where he met an old woman who had lost her cow across a river. Poor old Bessie was so important that the Devil agreed to build a bridge if he got to keep the first living thing that crossed it. It turns out that the little woman

could care less about her dog, and tricked it to crossing the bridge first so that the Devil couldn't keep her. I always knew the Welsh were a crafty bunch.

The journey there was marvelous, though. We took the Vale of Rheidol Railway, in a quaint little train, across fields adorned with sheep and picturesque cottages. Once there, I hobbled with my sprained foot (trust me, the irony of going on a hike with a bum foot is not lost on me) amongst the several tourist shops, coffee shops, and the on-site hotel. The scenery made me feel that at any moment dwarves would come ambling out of one of the stone buildings, welcoming my as Gimpy, their newest companion. If science teachers ever wished to show their pupils a prime example of erosion, it would be this. The bridges were stacked on top of one another, with the most recent on top, spanning a deep chasm surrounded by lush vegetation. Everything was cool and dripping with water and a simple tranquility. After about an hour it was regrettably time to return home.

In the past 48 hours I've managed to pack more into my life than I possibly would have in a whole month back in the States. And even though it may include becoming a temporary cripple or getting far too much sleep, it's completely worth it.

## **October 2, 2011**

Yesterday I ate a scone, climbed a hill, and saw a castle...basically, a pretty typical British day.

It was a completely wonderful time. The international student services were putting on another trip for us, so of course I took advantage of it. How could I say no to paying only £25 for being shuttled to amusements all day on a swanky coach?

We started off by going to King Arthur's Labyrinth, a touristy attraction in Corris, Wales. Visitors, once wearing dashing mining helmets, descend into the icy, dark depth of caves to discover a story from the Dark Ages when King Arthur had to defend Britain against the Saxons despite challenges and numerous wounds. The statues and timed voice recordings were cheesy in the most wonderful way, but the real highlight was the short boat ride through the entrance of the caves where a waterfall magically parts its frigid sheet of water just in time to keep the passengers dry. Quite lucky, really. The rest of the area boasted a pottery shop, a toy shop, a jewelry shop, and a potion shop. The latter perhaps plays into the whole medieval mysticism, but I found it also very appropriate for Wales. It turns out that the Welsh can be somewhat superstitious individuals, believing in the 'little people' (kind of like fairies), and the like. So I found it almost refreshing that there was a shop detailing how to properly make your potion before purchasing it, without the slightest trace of mockery.

After that, we made our winding way to Harlech Castle. One of our 'tour guides' provided a running commentary on the landscape, which proved to be very interesting. We were travelling through the famous Snowdonia country, which boasts the second highest peak in the UK (the first being in Scotland). Now, I must be a Rocky Mountain snob, because the peaks held undeniable beauty, but they're more of what I would classify as gentle rolling hills, with an occasional craggy outcropping. But that's just the 'Merican in me, I guess.

While we were simply riding along on the bus, I got to chatting with a fellow from Northern Ireland who was sitting across the aisle from me. He was tickled when he heard my name, because he figured he could actually remember it. But when he heard my middle and last name, he started chuckling. I can see why it would be funny to mash together an Irish, French, and German name, but I casually explained that's just how it goes in America...some people

even just make up names. This is a topic I've found to be reoccurring here; most other international students have a strong identity with their nation, and therefore assume that we hold that same sort of allegiance with our heritage, or even the region of the states we come from.

When I further explain that I have no specific 'American roots', as I've moved about every 2 years growing up, it further astounds them, perhaps even frightens them. I swear I can see it on their faces that they think this great big melting pot is perhaps melting away our identity, but I'm pretty sure I've still got a grasp on who I am, even if it's a bit melty.

So, the castle. I'm beginning to run out of words to describe the beauty I'm seeing here. Of course it was breathtaking and exquisite and a whole other host of clichés. The castle sits on the top of a massive hill, overlooking a town below and the sea further out. At the time the castle was built, the water levels were much higher, so it didn't have as much of a Mufasa on Pride Rock impact back in the day. Edward I built the castle in the 13th C. to keep an eye on Snowdonia, but the rebellious Welsh were just too cunning and it was taken by Madog ap Llywelyn in 1294, and again by Owain Glyn Dwr in 1404. Alas, the Welsh could not keep a grasp on it forever, and it fell under power of Edward IV, and from then on remained in English power. There also was a seven-year siege on the castle during the War of the Roses, out of which came the song, 'The Men of Harlech' (try singing a rousing round of that next time you're drunk).

Besides the major attractions in the trip, there was plenty of time to enjoy local cuisine at the places we stopped (always a favorite activity of mine). I swear, I will become incredibly fat here—like Sunday brunch at Golden Corral fat. In the morning, I indulged in a fresh-baked scone with clotted cream and jam, and a latte. Already delicious, it was only magnified by the fact I had not had breakfast in my mad dash out the door due to setting my alarm incorrectly and

oversleeping. Then in the afternoon, my taste buds were dazzled by the local specialty—Welsh Cakes. I would describe these as a happy lovechild between a scone and a buttermilk biscuit, with a couple raisins, sultanas, and currants thrown in. They look unassuming and simple, but one bite and I was hooked.

The Welsh cakes would be a good example as to my perception of Britain versus that of a local, I suppose. To me, they're new, exciting, and ever so pleasurable. But to those who have grown up with them, they're just there. When we were at the castle, I spotted a family out for an evening walk. They trotted by without a sideways glance; the mother more preoccupied with catching her young daughter's hand. How amazing must it be to get to the point where you become desensitized toward being around a *castle* full of years of history? Sure, it would be rather ridiculous for the residents to wake up every morning, look out their window, and say, 'Oh my GOD! Say, did you know we had a castle in our back garden?' But still, I think my fellow Americans get my point. It's just amazing to me to be in a place full of so much beauty and history, and it just kills me that it doesn't seem to phase the people who are lucky enough to live here.

Who knows? Maybe in a few months' time I too shall look upon a castle and barely blink in response. But until then, I'm going to keep planning ways to get out and immerse myself in such great sightseeing.

And perhaps find myself some more Welsh cakes.

**October 7, 2011**

Accents are a curious thing. They add personality to our speech, can seem alluring, make communication more difficult at times, or stereotype. It's interesting that something we basically have no control over ends up defining us in ways we might agree or disagree with. I have thoroughly enjoyed listening to the medley of accents since coming to Britain. Most of America's perception of British accents revolves around Hollywood movies, and that's usually a sampling of a posh accent. I was far from ignorant that there would be a wider range of accents than this, but all of the subtle differences in language in such a small nation is really amazing. Words move from being smoothed and rounded in the south of England, to being slightly more throaty and rolled in Wales, and on. (Mind you, this is just my interpretation, I'm sure a linguist would find plenty to argue against my descriptions).

I haven't had too many 'embarrassing American moments' here yet. The most memorable was when a Welsh fellow told me where he was from, and I thought he had said some town I had never heard of. So I asked where exactly that was. He looked at me blankly and said, 'Erm, well, this country, but south.' Turns out he had said South Wales. I quickly tried to assure him I wasn't as stupid as that made me seem.

It's easy to sit and listen to all the British accents (and accents of other international students) and try to place where exactly they're from. But sometimes it's easy to forget that the door swings both ways, and people can just as easily pick out where I'm from by how I speak. I had my first international politics class on Tuesday, and I found it immensely enjoyable. It was structured as a seminar, meaning that students basically drive the class, as opposed to the lectures where you only listen to the professor. This delineation of classroom learning was interesting to me at first, as we tend to integrate the two parts more in the US. But the class concerns questions of international politics. We opened with questions of how to define ethics, etc. So of course,

American torture policies came up (I find it amazing that American government seems to come up in about every class, regardless of the subject, although, granted in a politics class it seems more on topic). I sat for about a half hour before speaking, and when I opened my mouth, the effect was comical. Individuals who had passionately been abusing American practices looked almost afraid. I wanted to laugh, because if they had known me, I'm far from being the violent type. But also, isn't that the point of classes such as that? That you get to voice your opinion with other individuals, and hopefully learn from different points of views?

I guess that's the hang-up with accents. We think we like them, because they signify some mysterious culture we don't quite get; a foreign charisma. But just as quick we judge as well. When we meet people, we automatically try to see how we fit with them, and accents allow for some quick knowledge, a glimpse into that person's background. I think the danger lies when we leave it there, and don't bother asking how the person is different than their accent.

So who knows, maybe I'll just walk around saying 'ya'll' really loudly until I figure this one out.

### **October 8, 2011**

I spent the morning watching sweaty men in thigh-high shorts and polos playing 'the rugby.' (I'm not sure why, but people say they watch 'the rugby', and not just 'I'm watching rugby'. It makes it sound so proper...) Sports and I generally don't have much of a relationship, but being a qualifying game for the World Cup, I thought it a wonderful cultural opportunity. First thing to know, rugby fans are hardcore here. So my ignorance of the sport might have been a little disconcerting to a few people. But I was struck at how intricate/strict the rules of the

game actually are. Maybe it's because I'm used to American football and soccer, and this seems like a bit of both, but I couldn't keep it straight. It also amazed me that a sport could be so barbaric (no real protective gear and full-on tackling) yet so proper at the same time (polos and tucked in shirts). I also was musing on the fluidity of allegiances. Wales won against Ireland, so naturally everyone here was extremely pleased at that. The subsequent game was England versus France. I had assumed that people would be supporting England, as it is part of the UK, and they would rather have them win than France. Nope. There were, obviously, a few English fans, but on the whole the Welsh pride came out in full as they rooted for the French to win. Luckily for them, England was defeated and is now out of the running for the World Cup.

After this, I took a short 15 min. ride by train to visit the nearby town of Borth. This quaint little town is a popular tourist destination in the summertime, mainly for camping and other outdoor activities. But the day was cool and drizzly, and as we wandered along the roads we only saw some townspeople, a dog or two, and nearby animals in fields. In one direction the town sleepily spreads from the train station up the hill to an old WWII memorial, and expanding further in the other direction is a long sandy beach. Old weathered tree stumps are visible beneath the sand, and are said to be the remnants of an old forest. The legend of Cantre'r Gwaelod tells that at one time the area was protected by a great wall, and the sea held out by floodgates. One night, a drunken gate guard neglected his duties and allowed the sea to rush in, destroying the area.

We explored an old church across the train tracks, making friends with a pony along the way, before taking refuge against the drizzle and wind in a small tea shop. After a bit it was back to the train station, where some very sweet attendants showed us around a little museum of the old rail stations. After regrettably informing us the train was ten minutes late, they proceeded

to invite us to watch a DVD of the history of Borth. At first I was apprehensive because I didn't want to miss the train, but it turned out it was all told in 8 min. But bless their hearts, they were so enthusiastic and proud of that little museum and the piece of history it represented.

My visit there was short but perfectly captured this part of Mid-Wales, and I felt absolutely thrilled in knowing that I could just pop over to this little town that would be worthy of going on holiday to.

### **October 8, 2011**

**'To my mind, the greatest reward and luxury of travel is to be able to experience everyday things as if for the first time, to be in a position in which almost nothing is so familiar it is taken for granted.'**

— Bill Bryson

### **October 11, 2011**

Even though I've been in classes for a little over a week already, it doesn't quite feel like I've completely fallen back into step with my academic life. In part, this is probably because the classes meet much less frequently than I'm used to, but also because the structure of classes is (obviously, I suppose) different. There seems to be much more emphasis on independent learning here. Yes, in seminars students are expected to come prepared to contribute. However, assignments don't seem to be a daily occurrence, and when they are given, professors don't badger you with the due date. In fact, we were even told they were *prohibited* from even telling

us the date, in case they told us the wrong date and we used that as an excuse for not handing in coursework. Basically, it's a massive departure from the class norm back home.

The geek in me is able to appreciate the fact that while cultures may have different approaches to learning, the drive for education is still there. Child psychologists can debate the best way that brains act like sponges and suck up information, but I'm just glad that no matter the culture, there seems to be a common desire to make sure a child does not spend the entirety of their life as an ignoramus.

Being the English nerd that I am, I found a bit of the poem, 'At the Fishhouses' by Elizabeth Bishop, captures my feeling of my education here. (Learning and the seaside—how could it not fit?)

'...I had seen it over and over, the same sea, the same,  
 ...It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:  
 dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,  
 ...forever, flowing and drawn, and since  
 our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.'

### **October 16, 2011**

As much as I love living in Aberystwyth's small town atmosphere, sometimes it's nice to be able to go to a place where there are no sheep in sight.

Yesterday I went to completely livestock-free Birmingham. As it was a 3 hour train ride away, we decided to leave early. Sadly this meant I had to miss the semi-final of the Rugby World Cup, but seeing as Wales lost to France, I think I might have spared myself some

disappointment (Indeed, on the train ride home I had a lengthy conversation with a feisty old woman about the ‘absolute tragic results’).

Once there, we set off to find the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, which proved to be a bit of an exploration, seeing as we were constantly distracted by eclectic mixture of beautiful old architecture, shiny new shops, and the constant movement of pedestrians, traffic, and even pigeons. It was like every inch of the city was screaming out at us, and it was absolutely marvelous.

The museum itself was very nice, with free admission and 3 stories of artwork in various medium. Some of it was very focused on history/culture, including the ‘Americas’ exhibit and the ‘Ancient Egyptian’ exhibit—there was even a mummy! Outside, a food festival was in full swing, and everything from Chinese take-away, to delicate French appetizers, to frying doughnuts were combining into tantalizing smells. One very cultural moment was when I realized there was a demonstration in relation to the ‘occupy protests’ It was insightful because it further allowed me to understand the economic situation surrounding the country I’m living in, but also the demeanor of the individuals participating really struck me. I had to look twice to realize what was going on. There was simply a modest group of people with signs, standing slightly off in one corner of the square and several policemen peppered throughout the area. Not that I’ve ever personally witnessed a massive riot, but it amazed me how calm and collected the group was. I suppose “quaint” would be a word to describe them, which generally isn’t what comes to mind when thinking of protests back home.

For the rest of the day, we decided to take full advantage of the massive shopping centers in the city. I was a bit disappointed to see a 3-story Forever21, but the let-down of having a well known store from back home was quickly remedied by sheer number of places I had never heard

of. After about 2 hours though, I was quickly becoming overwhelmed. Primark resembled Wall Street, and I passed at least 3 H and M stores in a 2 block radius (How do they all manage to stay open? Do the citizens of Britain really need that many discounted jumpers?). A scone was desperately needed, and bless those British tea shops, it was not difficult to find. A few more hours were passed in heady consumerism before we grabbed a quick dinner before the train ride back.

I was glad for the energy supplied by my Chow Mein during our mad dash off one train and onto another. We had accidentally boarded a train bound in the right direction, but that would have stopped about 2 hours short of Aberystwyth, and quickly had to change platforms after we realized our mistake. I blame it on a cocktail of being tired and the ill advice we received from a gentleman we asked for help in finding our platform the first time. I would have had a few choice words for him had we not been busy sprinting away.

But in the end, we managed to get everything sorted out, and a few hours later returned back in Aberystwyth, completely exhausted and happy from dear old Birmingham.

### **October 25, 2011**

Something that I find enduringly endearing, and at time slightly frustrating, is the utter preoccupation that Britain seems to have with health and safety. Don't misunderstand me—I want to avoid tragic safety mishaps with chainsaws or light sockets just like the next person, I've just never seen such great preventative lengths elsewhere.

Upon my arrival I was instructed to register all electrical appliances I had in my room, and if they were over a year old they would need to be tested or else they would be subject to

confiscation. Not wanting my 2-year-old (but still perfectly healthy little piece of technology) laptop to be taken, I dutifully submitted it to be tested, and now it proudly sports a sticker proclaiming it passed inspection, complete with a smiley face on it. Fire doors are EVERYWHERE in my hall, and when I first saw them I had thought they meant they were emergency exits only, ie. a fire exit. Nope, they're just nifty little doors to help contain any potential fires. My door has 4 fire safety signs (2 in English and 2 in Welsh). There are even quaint little signs telling me how to spot meningitis, complete with illustrations of choking people. Recently in the news, I saw a fellow participating in the occupy protest at St. Paul's become rather irritated at the accusation that their tent-city was not in compliance with all health regulations.

All of these things touch my heart. I don't think anywhere else you could find such cheerful complicity with so many rules. However, I just don't understand them always. I absolutely cannot have any faulty wiring in my room, and yet my window is barred from opening more than 4 inches. So what happens in case of a fire? I suppose I calmly proceed through the labyrinth of fire doors to the designated fire safety point. But I guess the whole 4 inches thing is a safety measure in itself—no one wants drunken students trying to fly out windows. But from my ignorant foreign perspective, I'd like a window evacuation route. Regardless of whether or not I find all of these measures logical, they are without a doubt, here to stay. After all, according to the Health and Safety Executive of Great Britain, 'Good health and safety is good business'. And who can argue with that?

**October 29, 2011**

**‘Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.’**

— T.S. Eliot

### **November 3, 2011**

‘Keep Calm and Give Blood’

These signs started popping up around campus a week or so before Halloween, so I assumed it was some sort of promotion for an odd vampire-themed party...or something. But after seeing these all over the place, and even in reception areas of university buildings, I took a closer look. These dainty little posters were indeed a promotion, but for a blood drive. Curiosity took hold, and I began a Googling storm to find out more.

It wasn't difficult to find the dates and places that the blood drive was going to take place—Aberystwyth is a fairly small town. But a lot of hits came up about the style behind the poster. Back during WWII, Britain distributed posters saying 'Keep Calm and Carry On' as part of an attempt to raise national morale. It seems that these were mostly unremembered for most of the rest of the 20th Century, until a few resurfaced. Since then, they have made a splendid recovery, and their theme is seen on a plethora of merchandise in all sorts of parody. As these posters did such a spiffy job catching my attention, I felt it was only right to partake in the blood drive. I went in on the second to last day it was being held, and was surprised to actually be turned away because there were so many donors at the time! I was very politely asked to make an appointment for the following day instead. When I showed up to my designated time slot the next day ('fully hydrated on liquids and having recently dined' as per the charming instructions) I went through the typical screening processes. The whole appointment

went smoothly, with multiple queues and a basket of biscuits to munch on at the end. Pretty much everything you'd expect from a British blood drive. The one thing that did surprise me was how busy it appeared to be. The gentleman attending to me said that they had been coming in at half past seven in the morning, and not leaving until well past nine at night. Now that's what I call a spirit of goodwill, my fellow university students!

In particular, I loved how this whole thing caught me off guard. Something that is common culture to people here made me go on a hunt to find out more. That's the best part of getting to live in a foreign country—you get settled in and get a hang on the major differences, then out of nowhere you're knocked out of your complacency with something as simple as a poster.

### **November 8, 2011**

Every morning I nerd it up with a cup of coffee while I watch BBC news. I like feeling informed in the world, especially when I'm in my international politics class, surrounded by people who actually know things like the capital of Nigeria. My 30 min/day is the least I can do. So a little while ago, I started seeing the newscasters wearing fake flowers. At first, I figured they were just looking snazzy, flashing to an 'attractive to the eye and soothing to the smell' moment, but after I saw a basket of the same type of flowers in my dining hall I came to my senses and realized it was actually for some reason. The flowers are supposed to be poppies, signifying Remembrance Day here in the UK, where all of the fallen veterans since World War I are remembered. The story behind the poppies has to do with the battle of Flanders Field. I found the whole purpose really nice, but I was also amazed at how so many students are

supportive. You can walk around campus and see these little poppies adorning every few jackets, and when it comes to ‘purchasing’ the flowers, it’s not required payment, but rather an optional donation. You’d expect a battle-ravaged basket, with carnage left from masses of people wanting something free like those houses that leave a bin of candy out on Halloween with a sign that says ‘take one’. But sure enough, everyone pops a few coins in the donation can before getting their poppy. I just find the whole system of compliant order amazing.

Another day of importance in the UK happened this past Saturday. The 5th of November was Guy Fawkes and Bonfire Night. My knowledge of this day was very Magic School Bus, and pretty much revolved around V for Vendetta, but at least I wasn’t completely in the dark.

And I’m sure that a lot of people actually care about the history and meaning of the day, but in a college town, days like that are an excuse for another party. Aberystwyth did it up in the right way.

In my opinion, it made a much better show than the blowing up of Parliament anyway.

## **November 20, 2011**

Sometimes, life is just better in a kilt. At least, that’s the feeling I got this past week when I visited Scotland.

The night before some friends and I made our trip up to Edinburgh, I found myself sleeping with visions of haggis and whiskey in my head. However, the journey up was much less pleasant. There were several ‘technical issues’ at stations where we needed to get connections, so we found ourselves amidst detours and many fellow disgruntled and misplaced passengers. Several of those were screaming babies. But we made it to

Edinburgh only a few hours later than we intended, and managed to find our hostel quickly. It was right next to Edinburgh Castle and within a quick walk of the middle of the city. That night, I briefly had to put other thoughts out of my head, like the ever so charming movie *Hostel*. Of course the reality was that our accommodation was great—maybe not necessarily where one would take their girlfriend to impress them, but the staff was very friendly, and the entire place had a very laid back and welcoming atmosphere.

As we stepped out on the streets the next morning, we were greeted by the drifting sound of bagpipes—no kidding. Wandering through the beautiful old architecture we managed to find our first bagpipe playing, kilt wearing, red-headed Scotsman, and I already felt as if our trip was complete. But contrary to simply kicking back and basking under the weak Scottish sun, we made full use of our time there. The first few stops on the agenda included St. Giles' Cathedral, a massively impressive structure at the heart of the city.

Services are still held there regularly, but it is also open to the public for viewing. The stained glass windows and high, arching ceilings were astonishing, and in combination with the quiet history of years and years of individuals coming there to find peace or guidance made me sit for a moment, with my head tilted back just to take it all in. After, we wandered over to the National Museum of Scotland where I was able to learn all about the fascinating Scottish history, but there were also various other exhibits on display. Among those was Dolly the Sheep, which was probably the happiest nerd accident of the whole trip.

The next day was arguably the highlight of the trip, when we visited Edinburgh Castle. Now, I realize that numerous castles pepper the European countryside, but I still find every single one still standing amazing. The castle itself even included two miniature museums of Scottish military, a cafe, a dog cemetery (those lovely devoted soldiers), a chapel, and the

Scottish Crown Jewels. A part I found the most interesting was the inclusion of the Stone of Destiny with the jewels. At first, the name seemed rather melodramatic to me, so I went to ask one of the attendants the history behind the stone. It turns out that the stone was just a bit of local rock that was dug up and used as a coronation seat for about a thousand years. The idea was that the king would say his oaths on the stone, thus tying himself to the land and the people of which he would rule. England had taken the stone for about 700 years, but the Queen returned it to Scotland in 1996, and it has happily lain there right next to the ever-so-shiny crown ever since. This just goes to show you that sometimes the most grimy and unassuming things have the best story.

That day we also saw the National Gallery of Scotland, the Sir Walter Scott Monument, and the Nelson Monument. My traveling companions liked to joke that I was far too enamored with old things, but my draw to history was insatiable. It helped my argument that most of the museums were free admission, so how can someone really argue about looking at art and old stone pillars then? God bless the British and their desire to educate the masses.

The following day was our last full day in Scotland's capital. Previously, the weather had been fairly pleasant, but for a nice send-off it decided to be chilly, breezy, and just downright drizzly. It's all part of the experience, right? So that day I set out, my Northface plastered tightly around my body, to cram a little bit more culture in. We saw St. Mary's Cathedral in the morning where on the way we saw a Chinese man in traditional Scottish dress playing the bagpipes (somehow the illusion was shattered at that moment), and went on an exhibition to find the Royal Botanical Gardens but after walking for 40 min decided that was a lost cause. We reasoned there are trees outside of an elusive park and our energy was better spent elsewhere. We also managed to stumble around and find a famous whiskey distillery (but opted out of

the £20 tour), a decadent fudge shop, Edinburgh University, Scottish Parliament, and the Palace of Holyroodhouse. The latter particularly interested me, as it is where the Queen stays when she is in Scotland, but sadly by the time we arrived at the Palace, it had been closed down for the day. Instead, we just crept around outside the garden, hoping to catch a glimpse of something at least semi-important without being arrested. I saw a shrub and a fancy window or two, and managed to escape handcuffs, so I chalked it up to a victory.

I was sad to leave, because I knew that despite the many amazing places we saw, I knew there were so many more we missed. But I suppose that's the glory of traveling—you can go somewhere and never fully capture it, so it keeps you wanting to come back for more. However, our sore feet managed to carry us all the way home. And while I was glad to be back at my little seaside university, after such an intense few days I knew I would be seeing tartan for quite some time.

### **November 20, 2011**

I kept up my traveling marathon by going to Manchester just a few days after returning back to Aberystwyth. For a while in British history, Manchester was viewed as really just an industrial city, mostly for the textiles produced there. But lately, the name of the city conjures up many other thoughts. Probably most famous of those is football. Manchester United used to be the city's football team, but recently, Manchester City has come into its own, and the deep red and baby blue jerseys can be seen vying for loyalty in just about every sports shop. Football is so big there that there even is the National Football Museum (which was sadly closed for renovations when we went).

The city has a lot more to offer as well, with my favorite probably being the Wheel of Manchester. It seems to be modeled after the London Eye, and overlooks most of the city. For a small admission we were able to go up in a capsule and be dazzled by the skyline, and a riveting commentary in about 8 different languages. We chose to stick with the English one. Of course there were massive shopping centers as well, accompanied by plenty of restaurants. Instead of doing the typical food court experience, we chose to go to the Hard Rock Cafe, just about a street away from the Wheel, where we had the wonderfully predictable pleasure of listening to great music and eating entirely too large of portions of food while gazing at dead celebrity's memorabilia.

We also visited an art museum, and the Manchester Cathedral, where a rock band was practicing inside the sanctuary for an event being held there that night. I'm fairly certain that was the first time I would have ever been able to use the words 'smoke machine' and 'cathedral' in the same sentence. There was also a Christmas market being held at the city center. It added to the charm of the city, decking the streets out in twinkling lights and miniature log cabins that served as vendor's booths. The food was particularly enticing, with various flavors of chocolate covered marshmallows, Belgian waffles, and mulled wine mixing their scents as we walked by. At first it was a bit odd for me to see all the Christmas celebrations. Right now I'm more prepared to see Horns of Plenty on grocery store advertisements, and little traced hand turkey crafts pinned up on fridges back home. But obviously, the UK doesn't celebrate Thanksgiving (although several very nice friends offered to help cook a Thanksgiving feast with me on the big day, but after considering the effort needed to do justice to a full meal in university accommodation, we opted to try and find turkey elsewhere. Nonetheless, the effort was appreciated). But seeing as there are no signals coming at me that it should be Thanksgiving,

except for my little bit of homesickness, it was very easy to slip into the Christmas feeling and fully enjoy the market.

Manchester is situated in a very beautiful part of Western England. Cheshire is a neighboring area, just a short train ride outside of the city. Many footballers from the Manchester teams actually have their homes out a bit in the country (including David Beckham at the time he played there), and as we ventured out that way, we convinced ourselves that several nice Mercedes belonged to one or two of them. I also was tickled by the name of the region. It made me think of *Alice In Wonderland* and *The Lord of the Rings* combined. I kept my eyes peeled for hobbits or large pink and purple cats, but I mostly saw sheep. Sheep are sneaky, I've decided, with their semi-crossed eyes and eerily quiet presence. At one point we were walking along a country road, and I didn't notice a sheep until it was very close to me by the gate. It scared me. I gasped. My gasp scared the sheep. The scared sheep scared the rest of the sleeping sheep. And then I had become responsible for a whole flock of sheep running to another side of the pasture. Call me the Big Bad Wolf.

But embarrassing moments aside, it was a really enjoyable trip. The entire area made me really realize the ease with just how much is packed into the UK. You can be in a metropolitan area with about 2.5 million people, but just a few minutes later you can find yourself in the country with sheep and footballers in gleeful cohabitation.

**November 28, 2011**

**‘Remember what Bilbo used to say: It’s a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there’s no knowing where you might be swept off to.’**

— J.R.R. Tolkien

### **November 28, 2011**

I thought I knew a thing or two about fairs. Some of my favorite childhood memories come from the state fairs we would go to in Montana while visiting my grandparents. Baseball caps, cowboy boots, corndogs, funnel cakes, 4-H prizes for baked goods and quilts, and prize cows—these are the things I’m used to when I go to the fair. Instead I got curry and chips, Welsh beef burgers, candy floss (aka cotton candy...so alright, that’s the same, just with a fancy British name), and only rides and games. There were the typical win-an-overpriced-stuffed-animal games, arcade games (I lost terribly at racing), and funhouses and the essential teacup rides that have the potential to make you puke up your curry and chips. And even though most of the amusements were the same, there were some different. There was no Ferris wheel, to my displeasure. I don’t think I’ve ever been to a fair where there hasn’t been one. So I made up for this by playing bumper cars, where several 14 year old boys seemed to have a personal vendetta against me. And the other interesting bit was in the arcade. When we first walked by, I saw the Queen’s face staring at me in about a dozen places. There were several of the machines where you roll a coin in, and try to hit it in the right place so that the bar will push money off the ledge and into the slot. In these machines were numerous pound notes, all with the Queen smiling craftily up at me, as if asking me to play the game (I managed to resist her charm, and keep my

change). But it was funny to me, because I've grown quite used to using the different currency, but my Americanness just popped out when I was surprised by the bills. I'm not sure why it did; perhaps it just didn't seem like they mixed: tacky arcade games and proper British money.

Another thing that made me giggle at first was when someone looked at a rickety old ride and said, 'Naw, I'm not going on that. I don't trust those gypsy rides.' Usually in America, we think of gypsies as shawl-covered, bejeweled, and glass-ball reading figures. But here, there actually are gypsies, otherwise called travelers, that live in caravan communities. So if there were any gypsies there that night, I couldn't tell, and didn't get my palm read.

On the whole, it was a cute, enjoyable fair, and a night well spent in Aber. By the end of the night, we stumbled out, giddy on juvenile fun, and passed several young boys huddled in a group (I'd hazard a guess of about 12 or 13 years old), who were giddy for a whole other reason. Between them were several cans of Strongbow, cracked open and being brought to their mouths periodically between huge gooney grins. Ah, fairs. It doesn't matter where they are, they enable indulgent overeating, bright lights and amusement, empty wallets, and teenage shenanigans the world over.

### **November 30, 2011**

Across the UK today, there was a 'day of action', where public sector workers went on strike. This even impacted my university (serious as it is, I never complain when a 9am lecture is cancelled...) I received a very polite email yesterday, informing me of the effects the strike would have on the university, and it also apologized for any disruptions to my learning. I not only found this very useful, so that I wouldn't waste my time going to class, but also wonderfully

considerate. There were also reports detailing how individuals have sympathy or understanding for the workers, but in the case of their children perhaps not going to school due to closures, they did not support their actions. Often, it seems that strikes escalate emotionally, and at least on this small level, I felt as though both sides of the issue were being observed rather well. On another note, as it is approaching the holidays and I am a visitor in the country myself, I became very aware of the fact that airports will become heavily affected by this; it was predicted that Heathrow might even experience 12 hour delays at customs, but so far, there hasn't actually been any major disruptions. Regardless, it made me glad I wasn't flying today, and hope that when I do go home for the holidays, neither snow nor frustrated union workers will stand in my way.

### **December 8, 2011**

I really couldn't live in a better place as an English major. It seems as though in any random pub there will be a little inconsequential plaque announcing that some famous writer once got inspiration from their visit there: 'And yes, Wordsworth gained his grand observations by sipping a pint directly where your muddy sneakers are right now!' or something along those lines. So I find it wonderful when I realize these little links to literature I'm studying. But the other day was far from a little link.

I got to travel to the English nerd Mecca—Stratford-upon-Avon, also known as the birthplace of the ever so great Shakespeare. Now, I have to acknowledge the controversy existing over whether or not Shakespeare was the actual individual everyone says he is, especially with movies like 'Anonymous' that have come out recently. But just for my pure joy,

and for argument's sake, I'm saying he was real, and I got to travel to the house where he first donned a neck ruff and learned how to hold a quill.

We left midday on a bus was chartered by the English and Creative Writing Society through the university, and I proceeded to endure the most winding automobile trip of my life. It probably didn't help that I was feeling ill, and when you resemble Shrek more than a human female, it might not be the wisest decision to travel, but I wasn't about to pass up such an amazing opportunity. So about 4 hours later, we staggered off the bus, and were cut loose into the blustery December day (or rather night, seeing as the sun had gone down so early) to explore and terrorize the town.

Stratford is what you might charmingly call a 'proper' English town, with beautiful old architecture bedecked in Christmas decorations, and even a street named 'Shakespeare Street'. There was a little bit of time before the show, so we went and saw Shakespeare's birthplace, and several other 'Shakespearean points of interest' (like random houses that might have some vague link to his life), but it really isn't that enormous of a town. So I nursed my running nose with several cups of tea, before heading off to the Royal Shakespeare Company's Swan Theatre. It was a beautiful theater, set up to mimic the old Elizabethan style where there is a low stage, with circular seating around it, and several galleries above (think of the Globe Theatre in London, but on a lesser scale). The play itself was Measure for Measure, perhaps not one of his most well-known plays, but I was tickled because I had studied it in one of my Shakespeare classes my Freshman year of college. And it came in handy too, as I was able to clear up several questions my friends had about the plot—my professor would be so proud. I really enjoyed the performance. Everything, obviously, was in the original script, but they took

several liberties in the interpretation of dress, etc., which really made it more interesting than watching people in poufy outfits all night.

The really sad part of the whole experience was that it was over so quickly. We had traveled for about 4 hours, and then about 6 hours later we had to travel back when all I really wanted was to snuggle up in some cute Stratfordian hotel with hot chocolate and keep exploring the next day. Instead I made my way back to Wales, and may or may not have had a dream on the bus where I spoke entirely in Old English.

### **December 9, 2011**

**‘Traveling is almost like talking with men of other centuries.’**

— René Descartes

### **December 19, 2011**

Something that traveling always teaches me is that time is relative. When you’re lying around a beach for a week, you sit blinded by holiday bliss, until one day your alarm wakes you up to a quick flight back to reality because somehow you gained 10 pounds and got the ridiculous ‘I-don’t-belong-here’ sunburn. Then there’s the instances you’re stranded on a dark road on a freezing night, regretting your choice to not Mapquest your way back to the hotel and you hope each chattering of your teeth doesn’t alert muggers to your vulnerable status—at those horrifying, frustrating moments time is going so slowly it’s like each tick of the second hand is a conversation mocking you. Then there are occasions when so much happens all at once, time

loses all sense of meaning. A conversation might start, 'Yeah, remember that one time we...' before you realize it was just that morning.

My journey home for Christmas was something of the latter. The last week I spent in Aberystwyth was consumed with finishing up little bits of business, going to class still (a lot of courses finished up the previous week, but I continued to have lectures and seminars held all the way through the end of the week) and packing up to leave. Something I found very annoying was that my dorm was the only university accommodation where the residents have to completely move out over break. I even had to return my keys or else face a penalty of £60!

The reason behind this is that over the break the building is used for backpackers or other guests to Aber, and while I realize that I'm not using the room at that time, it doesn't lessen the inconvenience of completely moving out. So by Friday, I was already exhausted, but managed to make it to my 8 am coach. That was another decision that could count as an 'experience'. I don't quite remember why I chose to take the coach to London and not the train, probably the cheap price, or the fact I wouldn't have to handle my luggage in between, but I think I'll pass in the future. However, it was nicer than I expected, actually. The coach itself was quite nice, but there are still those awkward experiences of mysterious noises, leg space that seems to shrink after about 1 hour, and a pervading smell of onions and stale air that always seem to occur on a bus. But as we left Wales, the winding (nauseating) roads offered up beautiful scenery. Up in the mountains, it had a slight dusting of snow, and the sheep that usually look like fluffy little cotton balls dotting the lush green fields suddenly became yellowish polka dots against the sparkly snow. But the result was just that it turned the countryside into that quintessential holiday postcard look.

About 7 hours later, we were in central London, and managed to fumble our way to our hotel. For the price, we really couldn't complain, but all the same, it could've taken some notes from the Four Seasons, or even just from a Best Western. Call me crazy, but I believe a hotel bed should have sheets, and that if there's a large dirt smear on a wall, it might be prudent to clean it off.

The next two days were packed just about as full as I could make them. I met up with an old friend I knew from Japan who is currently living near London, and we went to the British Museum. What was such a wonderful coincidence was that Hokusai's Great Wave was on exhibition at the time. When I lived in Japan, the artwork appeared everywhere, and of course it is well-known internationally. It was just really amazing that I was able to see a bit of culture from another place I've been abroad to, while I was seeing my friend at a whole new place. It was an 'It's a Small World' moment, for sure. That night, we all went to Hyde Park, where a Winter Wonderland event was going on. There was a 'German Christmas Market' (it's amazing what can be German when you have a few Bratwursts and mulled wine, and then slap a label onto it), along with ice skating and carnival rides. It would've been a much more enjoyable event though, if there was about 1/3 of the amount of people. Walking became more of a shuffle, and I'm fairly sure I touched a butt or two on accident due to the sheer proximity of bodies.

The following day, some of us went on a bus tour through London, to hit all the major sightseeing spots. It would've been fairly easy to take public buses or the tube, but when time is of the essence, having a very constrained route and a spiffy little commentary, the extra money is worth it. Of course, being England, it was drizzling in the morning. It soon stopped, but we were on an open-aired double-decker that whisked us through thoroughly December

temperatures with our bodies turning slowly to rigamortis. But every chilly moment was worth it. We hopped on and off at some of the more major sights, like Big Ben and Buckingham Palace, and we were even fortunate enough to see the changing of the guards. The only downside was that being the holiday season, London was completely saturated with tourists, so it made some of the areas a bit annoying. But the whole thing was just absolutely wonderful all the same. The rest of the time was filled with other little moments like afternoon tea, listening to Christmas bands, and getting caught up in the beautiful holiday decorations at shops and in streets.

It was a sad morning when I knew I had to wake up to catch my flight. Some friends had said their final goodbyes as they wouldn't be coming back after the holidays, and the entire city had just such an intoxicating holiday feel that it was so hard to leave. However, my trip to Heathrow was amazingly easy. I took the Heathrow Express from Paddington Station, which was really close to my hotel, and within 15 minutes I was tidily plopped off at my terminal. Even more surprising was how quickly I managed to get checked in and through security. Within an hour I was at my gate, with plenty of time to kill by drinking too much coffee and trying on a dangerous concoction of duty-free perfumes. My flight back was alright, as far as flying usually is. Even though I was exhausted, I was unable to sleep because we had taken off at midday, so I took full advantage of the free movies and had a successful little movie marathon as the stewardess (excuse me, flight attendant) brought me serving after serving of cellophane-wrapped airplane food. It was as close as I'll ever come to having a butler, I think, so thank you Delta. The funny part came after we landed. After the wheels touched down, I had that familiar feeling of 'ahhh home'. Except once we landed, we had to wait and get our luggage, then recheck it and go through security again, *then* I could walk to the arrival bay and get my luggage

yet again. From the time we landed to the time I saw my family, it was about 1 1/2 hours. Then after that, it took me 2 more hours to drive home. By the time I finally saw my bed, all I wanted to do was give my pillows a loving pat and say, 'Hello, old boys'.

I've been back in America for about a day, but it seems like so long ago that I was standing in Picadilly Circus, watching red buses zoom by. I'm so glad to be home for the holidays, and even more thankful that I didn't encounter any problems flying home. However, I already know I'll miss the UK over Christmas, encountering cravings for HP sauce or a cheerful greeting of 'alright?' by passersby, and I can't wait until I return in the new year.

### **December 19, 2011**

**“You seemed so far away,” Miss Honey whispered, awestruck.**

**“Oh, I was. I was flying past the stars on silver wings,” Matilda said. “It was wonderful.”**

— Roald Dahl

### **January 18, 2012**

**‘We have so much time and so little to do. Strike that, reverse it.’**

-Roald Dahl

I find myself back in Aberystwyth after another 'Planes, Trains, and Automobiles' experience. Almost every conceivable vehicle was used on my journey over here, but that's not to say it didn't go well. Staff at the airports in America, Amsterdam, and Great Britain were all perfectly helpful and friendly, and there were no crying babies to be seen. But after about 27

hours of travelling, it gets a bit old. So there I was, hoodie over my head, trying to sleep on the train from Birmingham to Aberystwyth (the last leg of my journey) and I heard a girl complaining to the man next to her about how she lives in South London and ‘the journey to uni is just murder’... I kept my head down in hopes it would shield her from my involuntary glare.

I’ve since moved back into my dorm and set about sorting out my classes for next semester. Although I tried to fix all this before the holidays, it somehow was not completely executed. The university is in full revision/exam mode, and completely chaotic. It’s wonderful being back.

Christmas break was rather busy for me; completing final essays and trying to take care of paperwork, etc. to ensure my legal return to the UK. So it went by rather quickly, and I didn’t have too much time to dwell on missing things in Aber. However, in the past few days I’ve had my memory jogged about some of the things that make going to university here particularly memorable. Yesterday I passed a lively group bantering about the latest football match on my way to buy soap, which was pronounced as ‘lovely’ by the clerk. It was completely foggy—so much so I wanted to yell, ‘Gorillas in the Mist!’— and then an hour later raining, before becoming sunny for a stunning sunset. And as I got a delightful cup of tea, I overheard some boys proclaiming a passing girl to be ‘absolutely lush’. Beyond just being back at a university setting, I’ve missed all the little things that make studying in the UK so special. Whether it be extensively long essays, blizzards, or rampant sheep, I’m looking forward to what the spring semester throws my way.

**February 5, 2012**

The past couple of weeks found the campus filled with groans, harried expressions, and many revelations of, 'I should have started this revision earlier', but the examinations for the first term finally ended. And of course, the ensuing weekend was, shall I say, particularly lively in the way that relieved youths in their prime of expendable cash and disregard to consequences only can. Alas, time continued on, and Aberystwyth entered into a new term and once again began filling our minds with knowledge.

Getting my schedule sorted out for this term was rather difficult, but I'm rather happy with the end product. To the great confusion of the heads of departments here, I'm taking classes from 3 different courses (something that isn't really done here): English, Geography, and International Politics. At first, I wasn't really trying to create an overlap in course material, but somehow all of my classes are a little bit linked, mostly through the concept of identity. This tickled my nerd funny bone, as being an international student, identity would seem to be a rather large issue. So what better way to explore this than contemplating it all term in largely different educational spheres?

Perhaps this is a good thing. At times, it's easy for me to forget I come from burgers and fries, and not fish and chips. In fact, the other day, I caught myself asking to borrow a jumper from a friend because I was cold. Back home, people might assume I'm making up some sort of slang term for a jump rope or asking for someone to mug me or something. But here, I, and everyone else, knew I was only asking for a garment of clothing. But I guess you start realizing how easy it is to assimilate into a new lifestyle when you start using colloquial terms without a second thought.

And then almost immediately after I begin thinking, 'Hey, I'm one of them!' a moment of complete 'outsiderness' will hit me. Recently, the UK has been experiencing rather 'severe'

weather, and is receiving a lot more snowfall than normal. Yet after hearing how the 4 inches of snow in London greatly disrupted travel, my sympathizing was no longer natural, after living in areas where snowfall of 4 inches might be a nightly occurrence.

But of course, Aber always does things its own way. Instead of this dreadful cold and snow, we've been experiencing that quintessential UK weather of chilly precipitation spitting from the cloudy sky. Gotta love that British weather.

### **February 7, 2012**

The Super Bowl is an annual event much anticipated by Americans, whether it be for the chicken wings, nachos, painted chests, or mind-blowing commercials. Or the football, of course. I can appreciate a good game, but personally I can never quite sympathize with the feverish banter that flies back and forth between opposing fans. I'm in it more for the whole experience of the game, which made me realize that like so many other of my native cultural events taken for granted, the Super Bowl would just not be the same from this side of the ocean.

There were plenty of opportunities for a true fan to watch the game here: several people were planning private parties of sorts, pubs were perhaps screening it, and the student union was showing the game. But I suppose it appears a little more lackluster when coming on at 11:00 pm in the mostly deserted union following the weekly poker night. Nevertheless, students showed up, crying, 'Come on, Yankees!' My first instinct was to gently pat these enthusiastic lads on the back and kindly inform them that that's *baseball*, but then I recalled that term was also an ever-so-affectionate nickname for us Americans. But despite the best of Welsh intentions, a little bit into the game the focus was not quite on the playing, but rather on the truly impressive beanbag

fort that was being constructed, and by halftime, most individuals decided it was more prudent to go to bed than to watch this strange American pastime at 1 am on a Sunday night.

Plus, it's hard to muster up a lot of excitement for a foreign sporting event when a nationally loved one is taking place at the same time. Currently, sports fans in the UK are being inundated with news about the RBS 6 Nations, an annual rugby competition between England, Ireland, Scotland, France, Italy, and Wales. The very day of the Super Bowl, Wales was thoroughly enjoying a victory over Ireland, something much more noteworthy than American football, even if Madonna was making an appearance.

### **February 17, 2012**

**'If a man be gracious and courteous to strangers, it shows he is a citizen of the world, and that his heart is no island cut off from other lands but a continent that joins to them.'**

— Francis Bacon

### **February 17, 2012**

When I was little, my dad called me peanut. Not the most flattering nickname, I suppose, to be fashioned after a legume. But it fit for me, despite considering that most girls I knew at the time would answer to someone saying, 'Hey, princess'. Because that was something I found even less likely to be than a nut. As far as I could tell, Cinderella was nowhere around, but there nevertheless was always that preoccupation with tiaras. And as far as I can tell, it has followed most people into adulthood.

I don't have enough phalanges to count the number of individuals I know who got up at 3 am last year to watch the Royal Wedding. Sure, Kate was beautiful, and all the eccentric hats were entertaining, but really, would these same people pay as much attention to the State of the Union Address? I find it a bit of a mystery why so many Americans get so enthused about the royal family when they aren't even our monarchy (in fact, wasn't it just a few hundred years ago we were vehemently against such an institution?).

However, I would completely understand such a level of excitement from this side of the pond. But after being here for a while, I've started wondering how most British citizens actually do view the monarchy.

This year the Queen celebrates her Diamond Jubilee, marking her 60 years on the throne. It kicked off with a commemorative church service, and there will be concerts, parades, visits to commonwealths, and numerous other public engagements throughout the year. It seems as though this year isn't just about the Queen though, but also a time for the rest of the royal family. This past week on Valentine's Day, Kate visited a hospital in Liverpool, while William began a visit to the Falkland Islands. These things all tend to make us feel a warm, happy glow inside when we think of the Crown, because as a girl in my class noted, 'They're all so beautiful and lovely'. But I was also interested in the not-so-pleasant views the British people hold.

I've heard the opinion that the Queen is merely an outdated figurehead, not really beneficial politically, that just taxes the people for a lavish lifestyle. True, the Parliamentary power she holds might not be as significant as one might expect, but her influence does extend quite far, especially when considering the 54 countries participating in the Commonwealth (interesting note: a person may own a house in the UK, but technically at the end of the day they're just renting the land and all of the land still belongs to the Queen). And the last figure

stated that the monarchy only cost 69 pence per person per year, which hardly breaks the bank.

Also, being that it is Wales, I've heard several proud Welsh individuals state that they don't necessarily feel that Wales fits into the equation. But even as far back as 1301, Edward II became the first Prince of Wales, thus firmly establishing ties with the Welsh. And if those contesting individuals would take a jaunty walk up to our university's library, they would find a plaque detailing how the current Prince of Wales, none other than Prince Charles, attended our dear own Aberystwyth University. At one time, it was even rumored that Prince William would come to Aberystwyth after his university education to learn some Welsh.

I suppose my own stance toward British Royalty might be a little bit convoluted. I don't understand why nations completely outside allegiance to the Queen (such as the good 'ol USA) would hold such affection for her, and I do see why British nationals might feel as though the monarchy serves a superfluous function. But it remains that the Queen is a symbol that makes the UK so charmingly, well, British. How many people joke about teasing the stone-faced guards outside of Buckingham palace, or think about the brilliant Crown Jewels inside the Tower of London? They're all images that are profoundly part of Britain's national identity.

But love them or not, the royal family will always find a way into your day in the UK from being on the news or even just to being on the money in your wallet. Then every now and then, you'll walk into a toy store like me, and find this...a Barbie doll replica of them.

At your fingertips, your very own shelf full of Will-and-Kate.

**February 19, 2012**

**‘What you’ve done becomes the judge of what you’re going to do – especially in other people’s minds. When you’re traveling, you are what you are right there and then. People don’t have your past to hold against you. No yesterdays on the road.’**

— William Least Heat Moon

### **February 23, 2012**

Tuesday consisted of me eating vast quantities of sugary food—something I not only excel at, but find helps bridge cultural gaps, naturally. The purpose behind me shoveling heaps of carbohydrates into my mouth was that Tuesday was Pancake Day here in the UK.

Technically, the day is known as Shrove Tuesday, the day before Ash Wednesday. As Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, the day before was historically the last opportunity to indulge in all of the decadent foods in the pantry. Thus, pancakes were a perfect opportunity to use up all the eggs, butter, etc. The tradition has carried on to today throughout Britain, with the flipping of thousands of frying pans at simple get-togethers or even pancake races.

It’s interesting to think that one specific day might hold so many different ways to celebrate it. We, perhaps, are more aware of how Christmas might be celebrated differently across cultures, but I think that rarely we muse on the lesser emphasized days. But in fact, there are a lot of various ways in which Shrove Tuesday is observed. Back home, we’re all very conscious of Mardi Gras, which is celebrated in numerous cities, but probably the most flamboyant and well-known is in New Orleans. But even just talking with friends here, I’ve come to realize other celebrations; in Germany right now, the Fasching Festivalis taking place,

an event much like the Spanish Carnival (In fact, one person told me that this year they were dressing up as a strawberry for Fasching...that makes our Halloween look rather dreary).

But seeing as I am currently in the UK, I thought I'd forego the beads and masks, and stick with pancakes. Here, pancakes are what we Americans think of as crepes—much thinner than pancakes we're used to. (Side note: while we also sometimes call pancakes 'flapjacks', those are *entirely* different things in the UK—more of what we might think of as a very sweet, chewy granola bar...something I learned one very sad morning with a confused waitress early on during my stay.) In a restaurant if you want the typical fluffy goodness we recognize as a pancake, you have to request an 'American pancake'. A more traditional British pancake is eaten rolled up, with lemon or orange squeezed on the top along with some sugar. So in honor of the delicious day, some friends and I got together, frying pans at the ready. We made a towering heap of British pancakes, along with a few of their fluffy American cousins, and topped them off with everything from strawberries and Nutella to bananas and oranges. It was the perfect way to acquaint my belt to the true meaning of the words, 'Fat Tuesday'.

### **February 27, 2012**

There comes a time every winter where it just seems like you're stuck under a heavy blanket of cold clouds and lethargy. Usually, Spring Break is the time to get out and recharge. But sometimes, the question begs: why wait? Yesterday, I traveled just a mere 3 hours to the Southern coast of Wales to the capitol city, Cardiff. Instead of winter blues I was met only with a sky overflowing with sunshine.

Considering South Wales is more densely populated than much of the rest of the country, and Cardiff is the capitol, I expected to spend the day exploring a massive city. In actuality, I would describe the area as a pleasant, mid-sized city (after my return, I discovered that Cardiff's population is only around 341,000 people—something that makes the activity level of the city much more understandable). Yet for its size, Cardiff has a lot to offer.

The first stop was, naturally, Cardiff Castle. The castle has been around for over 2000 years, transforming from a Roman stronghold to a Victorian estate, and finally, to a massively impressive historic landmark in the center of the city.

Nearby to the castle was the capitol building (where a lovely wedding just so happened to be taking place, Range Rover bedecked with bows out front and ready for the Honeymoon), and the Natural History Museum. I have to admit that I have witnessed larger and more impressive museums, but this did include charming, sometimes interactive displays that would be attractive to young children, or perhaps visiting, hyperactive university students. It also had a collection of art, with a large focus on Welsh landscapes. So, it actually is a very fitting museum for perhaps a lesser tourist destination, where families can go and enjoy the day. The other large attraction in the city is Cardiff Bay. Beyond the obvious attraction of coastal beauty, the bay is home to quite a few different draws. The first building you notice is the Wales Millennium Centre, which puts on musicals and other performing arts. Another iconic landmark is the Norwegian Church, built in 1868 for Norwegian sailors, but now serving as a quaint arts center. The truly enjoyable part of the bay was simply walking outside in the unusually beautiful weather. We weren't alone as tourists in prowling the seafront; the locals were also taking advantage of the lazy Sunday, perhaps most noticeably the energetic children yelling in Welsh for their parents to make a stop at the Mister Whippy ice cream truck.

Meandering back toward the city center, we were met with a beautiful mingling of the old and the new. Historic old churches were peppered along, right next to pubs, and an old library with Gothic architecture now converted into a bed and breakfast is right next to a modern, multi-story shopping center. Compared to much of the city planning in America, it might seem rather confusing; however, I found this last gazing upon the city as a way to encompass all of the capitol's facets. But also, it was a wonderful representation of the nation, where Welsh identity is held on to ferociously, while at the same time finding its niche among modern-day Britain.

### **March 1, 2012**

About a week ago, I started spotting daffodils in vases around establishments and thought, 'Oh, how nice'. Then, people started wearing them pinned on their shirts, and one night I even saw a girl going out dressed as a daffodil. Then I thought, 'Definitely a Welsh thing'.

Today, March 1st, is officially known as St. David's Day. Saint David is the patron saint of Wales, and just like Saint Patrick's Day, there's a whole day of festivities devoted to the fellow.

Leeks and daffodils are symbols of Wales, so people generally display them or wear them pinned on articles of clothing leading up to, or on the day. Parades or small festivals are also common, most of them focusing on typical Welsh food, like Welsh Cakes or Welsh Rarebit. The university honored the day by holding a Saint David's Day festival in the student union. The main hall was bedecked by Welsh flags, with booths giving out food samples or information, and at times there was even singing.

I definitely noticed that today doesn't have as much cross-cultural bang as, perhaps, Saint Patrick's Day—I'm pretty sure I've seen people dressed as leprechauns in the states, but there's never a daffodil to be found. But here the national pride was certainly out and about. And I'll never say no to an excuse for a Welsh Cake.

### **March 13, 2012**

**'We are torn between a nostalgia for the familiar and an urge for the foreign and strange. As often as not, we are homesick most for the places we have never known'.**

— Carson McCullers

### **March 14, 2012**

Sometimes it seems difficult to imagine English people cruising across the Atlantic several hundred years ago, and having their descendants live in and influence the nation that I know as home. At times I find myself in situations where I feel hardly culturally congruent in this society. Imagine, if you will, fried chicken being served at high tea.

Sometimes, though, the linking evidence is just there.

I was walking through my dorm's lounge the other day, and there was news about the recent Olympic swimming trials. As they detailed the latest success of a British athlete, the British National Anthem played in the background. I'm not sure why I never paid that much attention to it in the past, but it caught my attention because I had unknowingly started singing lyrics. Different lyrics, in fact, than should go to their national anthem.

It turns out that the British National Anthem, 'God Save the Queen' is what I know as 'My Country, 'Tis of Thee'. Eerie coincidence? Actually, it's not. It turns out that for a while, before America really knew what it was doing and was up and running, some of our British ancestors took a regal and familiar tune, and changed it up a bit to create a song dripping in American pride and patriotism. Of course, after a while we changed our anthem to 'The Star-Spangled Banner', which has its own unique history, and is the anthem we know and love today.

But this realization of singing, 'Sweet land of liberty...Land where my fathers died...Land of the pilgrims' pride...Let freedom ring', to a tune previously declaring fealty to the Queen made me laugh. On one hand, obvious links to heritage. On the other, a brazen act of defiance. Or, as the British might say, it was a bit cheeky of us, wasn't it?

### **March 29, 2012**

Something universally adored is food. We all bake, fry, sauté, or even flambé to tame our growling stomachs. But just as any other aspect of culture, what tickles your fancy in one corner of the globe might be vastly different from another.

I must admit, one of my first concerns with travelling here was not the food. I'm not super picky in the first place, but beyond that I knew I wouldn't be forced to swallow fish guts. So, perhaps, writing about food wasn't top on my priorities. But despite my naive tendency to concentrate on the familiar, there's quite a lot of cuisine here that leaves my gastronomical experiences different.

First, and possibly my only complaint, is the abundance of potatoes. I know I'm living right next to Ireland, which holds an almost unholy attachment to them, but sometimes the

dependency of a meal on potatoes overwhelms me. Almost any dish can be served with chips (laden with gravy, cheese, or more chips), and for the slightly more adventuresome diner, there's an option of potatoes prepared a million and one other ways—a favorite is usually roasted. But with so many years of cooking these spuds, they've gotten quite good at it, and although there may be a void in the cross-section of vegetable representation, at least those potatoes are rather tasty.

If you want to experience a typical British meal, go to any pub. There, among other things, is a roast, typically with chicken/pork and potatoes and Yorkshire pudding (The first time I heard of this, I was expecting a sort of a Jello pudding cup. What I was presented with made much more sense). While pretty common regardless of the day, people really tuck into a roast for Sunday lunch. It's just the thing to do.

Also, no matter what time of the day it is, it seems like you can always find a good old English breakfast. Featuring an assortment of toast, fried bread (which at first I thought meant more of French toast—nope, literally deep-fried pieces of bread), sausages, bacon (thick back-bacon, not that strippy stuff we have), baked beans (usually just slathered on the toast), and fried eggs, mushrooms and tomatoes, you will be sure to leave fully carbed-up and with arteries screaming for relief.

Something I was not expecting is the absolute affinity the British have for a sandwich. Never before have I seen so many kinds of breads sliced with an intense variety of fillings, neatly packaged in to-go cartons. Growing up, a sandwich was a PB&J in my cold lunch, but not necessarily something desired. But here, people will queue up a mile long for a tasty sandwich. (Note that here, PB&J is a disgusting American invention, not to taint the name of sandwich.)

Bringing the pub and sandwiches together is the intriguing and disgustingly delicious chip butty. Just like it sounds, it is a sandwich made out of buttered bread, filled with chips. At first glance, I thought, ‘What’s the point?’ but one mouthful in and I understood it all. Next time you have the necessary ingredients, it is my humble advice that you try it.

Although stereotypical, tea is ubiquitous. And the importance behind a proper cup of tea and accompanying goodie is not taken lightly. In fact, it is so overpowering that it even rubbed off on me, and ever since, I’ve had the perfect brew (the trick is in letting the water get just boiled, then adding the tea bag and not letting it stay in too long, apparently). A British friend of mine told me that her mother taught her that a good host should always offer a guest tea and fresh scones, even if they pop up unannounced, because it takes a minute to throw the kettle on, and you almost always have the ingredients on hand needed to whip up a quick batch of scones. And I truly find it amazing how many baked goods seem to come from the same ingredients. Give someone here some butter, sugar, flour, eggs, and a little British magic, and they’ll throw you out a scone, rock cake, or any number of delightful treats.

Although traditional British food seems to revolve around the same culinary pallet, I was pleasantly surprised at the international culinary influence. Due to the large Indian influence here, Indian food has inundated the cuisine world, and a good curry is now a thing to be appreciated on this island. But also, full-out Indian restaurants are not at all hard to find. Chinese take-aways hold a certain fondness in British hearts as well. And something even a little more exotic is the appearance of Lebanese food. I don’t think my mouth was ever so happy as the day it first experienced a shawarma (which involves slicing huge slabs of revolving meat!) and a falafel.

But focusing in even more, Wales has its own unique culinary history. Frequently on menus, you find bara brith (a kind of bread), or cawl soup. But two of my favorite Welsh foods are Welsh cakes, and Welsh rarebit. The latter has a particularly interesting history. When the name was conceived, Wales was rather poor, and oftentimes people could not even afford the cheapest meat at the time, rabbit, so instead they put cheese on bread. Thus, essentially, Welsh rarebit is cheese on toast.

So, I thought in the spirit of things, I'd provide recipes for those two dishes, courtesy of BBC. Enjoy!

### Perfect Welsh rarebit

#### Ingredients

- 125ml milk
- 1 tbsp flour
- 400g farmhouse cheddar , grated
- 175g fresh white breadcrumbs
- 1 heaped tsp English mustard powder
- 1 tbsp Worcestershire sauce
- 120ml ale , cider or Guinness
- 1 egg , plus 1 yolk
- 6-8 slices, toasted crusty bread

#### Method

1. Heat the milk in a pan, whisk in the flour and bring to the boil. Allow to bubble until slightly thickened. Reduce the heat to low and add the grated cheese. Stir briefly until melted, then add the breadcrumbs, mustard powder, Worcestershire sauce and your choice of alcohol. Cook, stirring, until the mixture starts to leave the side of the saucepan. Remove from the heat and leave to cool slightly.
2. Put the mixture in a food processor and, with the motor running, add the eggs. Keep it running for about a minute, then season with ground black pepper. Spread onto the toast and grill until browned and golden.
- 3.

### Welsh Cakes

#### Ingredients

- 225g plain flour
- 85g caster sugar
- ½ tsp mixed spice
- ½ tsp baking powder
- 50g butter , cut into small pieces
- 50g lard , cut into small pieces, plus extra for frying
- 50g currants
- 1 egg , beaten
- splash milk

#### Method

1. Tip the flour, sugar, mixed spice, baking powder and a pinch of salt into a bowl. Then, with your fingers, rub in the butter and lard until crumbly. Mix in the currants. Work the egg into the mixture until you have soft dough, adding a splash of milk if it seems a little dry - it should be the same consistency as shortcrust pastry.
2. Roll out the dough on a lightly floured work surface to the thickness of your little finger. Cut out rounds using a 6cm cutter, re-rolling any trimmings. Grease a flat griddle pan or heavy frying pan with lard, and place over a medium heat. Cook the Welsh cakes in batches, for about 3 mins each side, until golden brown, crisp and cooked through. Delicious served warm with butter and jam, or simply sprinkled with caster sugar. Cakes will stay fresh in a tin for 1 week.

### **April 14, 2012**

Every now and then, it's nice to spice life up a little bit by shouting, 'JA!'. Or maybe this only works in Germany.

Right now, we're in the middle of our (very long) 3-week long Easter holiday. I decided for the first bit of my break to go to Germany, to visit old friends and stuff myself with bread and chocolate.

My week was a haze of great food and drizzly weather, blurring each amazing day together. But, of course, there were several mini-trips that were especially remarkable. Nearby to where I was staying was the city of Trier, the oldest city in Germany. It was established by the Romans around 16 BC on the Moselle River, a river flowing out of the Rhine through France, Germany, and Luxembourg. Because of its location on the river, the surrounding landscapes are extremely lush, and a sight all in themselves. As we drove toward Trier, we

passed through the winding fields (a famous region for producing wine) until we finally descended into the city. What struck me most was probably the wonderful blend of architecture—a mixture of Roman influences with still a strong German presence. The Virgin Mary looked down from pink walls onto pedestrians on the street. Right next door was a pretzel shop, then around the curving corner was a strip club, and even further along was a pet store with a photo seeming to advertise a haircut in the window. The contrasts were absolutely wonderful. We made a stop at the Reinisches Landesmuseum, a museum devoted to the Roman history in the area, and later at the ruins of the Roman baths.

Also impressive was the Trier Cathedral, a church that was established as far back as 100 AD. It would always be worth a visit, but it was especially interesting while I was there, as the robe Christ was supposedly buried and resurrected in will be on display over the Easter season. It's only on display at special times, and this year, to mark the 500 year anniversary of it being shown, a local elementary school created 500 pastel-colored walking sticks in honor of the pilgrimages many individuals make to come view the robe. Perhaps one of my favorite mixes of the old and the new, however, was the city center itself. Beautiful shops and restaurants lined the streets, creating smells of coffee, waffles, and sausage as we browsed around the market that was taking place. On one side of me was a stall run by an old man, selling carefully crafted bouquets of flowers, and on my other side was a McDonalds—welcome to 21st C. Germany.

I was also lucky enough to go to Luxembourg. Again, this is a place I think hard to fully grasp for an American. With a landmass under 1,000 square miles, it's almost easy to sneeze right through it. Luxembourg City is truly amazing—one part is extremely new with skyscrapers shooting up in the sky, and housing buildings meant particularly for the European Union. This all overlooks the old section of the city, established also from Roman influence. On the day I

visited, there was an Easter market, a sort of flea-market on steroids, selling popcorn, candy, trinkets, and handicrafts. I snatched up a Luxem-wurst, a huge sausage exploding out of both sides of a brochen, to snack on as we prowled the streets.

One other highlight from my trip was visiting the village I lived in from when I was 3-5 yrs old. I spent Easter Sunday with our old neighbors, looking at my old house over pork with mushrooms and a lot of catching up. And even though it might be 16 years later, I still enjoyed devouring a Kinder chocolate Easter bunny just as much as I did back then.

**May 16, 2012**

**‘People travel to faraway places to watch, in fascination, the kind of people they ignore at home.’**

— Dagobert D. Runes

**May 24, 2012**

The year is winding down, and exam season is upon us. One evening as I was finishing up an essay full of worldly and impressive thinking, ‘A Hard Day’s Night’ popped into my head and started serenading me, which made me think that I simply owed it to The Beatles to pay tribute to their hometown.

Liverpool is best known, perhaps, as being the birth-place of The Beatles, any visit to the city will offer up numerous kitschy Beatles souvenirs, landmark spots, such as Mathew’s Street (where they played in their early days), and a Beatles museum. I’ve always been a fan of

the Fab Four, and was thrilled to get a photo next to them (well, at least a statue). But even if a discerning traveler is not particularly enthused about all the Beatle-mania, Liverpool still has a lot to offer.

Perhaps the second well known claim to fame for Liverpool in modern times is their football (soccer for us Americans) club, Liverpool FC. Their team has won 5 European titles, and they held the record for top-flight titles until last year Manchester United overcame that record. Nonetheless, this football team holds a strong, loyal fan-base, and can be found in the middle of many passionate conversations, even with fans far outside of the city.

Also, I knew Liverpool was a port city; however, I was more unaware of its impressive contributions throughout history. One stop we made was to the Liverpool Maritime Museum, a museum which focused on Liverpool's shipping and trade history. When we went, there was a massive exhibit on the Titanic. I didn't know that the ship had such strong connections with Liverpool, but the head office of the White Star lines, the Titanic's company, was situated in Liverpool. The reason that the ship did not set sail from Liverpool was because the water was too shallow for the behemoth of a boat. Also, Liverpool supported the Confederates in the American Civil War because of their interest in the cotton trade. I'm a bit of a history nerd, so I really enjoyed seeing all of the connections America has with Liverpool, and the museum itself was really beautiful and well-done.

Also along our sight-seeing stops were Protestant and Catholic cathedrals, both massive in size, and oddly I found the architecture to echo off of other well-known places. Forgive my rather blasphemous opinion, but the Catholic cathedral was a spitting-image of Space Mountain at Disneyland, and the Protestant cathedral seemed to look more like a tower in Mordor. But

both were exquisitely beautiful, with vibrant stained-glass and every part of the buildings constructed in such an impressive manner it was almost overwhelming.

The city was also multi-cultural in other ways—with a Chinatown and plenty of ethnic restaurants from Greek to Indian to Chinese-fusion. Such a multi-cultural influence is probably due to it being a port city, with a long history of intercultural influences. In fact, Liverpudlians (awesome name, isn't it?) have a very unique accent as well, probably as a result to the various peoples present in their history. I thought I could understand most of the British accents fairly well now, but the Scouse accent was a whole different experience. I'd equate it almost to going to Texas in the States—sometimes it feels, or can be prided on, being almost an entirely separate place. Even the fashion was different, and more eclectic than other places I've gone in Britain. I even saw a Scouse Brow or two crawling their way across young, aspiring fashionista girls as I prowled around Liverpool One, Liverpool's renowned shopping centre.

I was only in Liverpool two very short days, but I found the city to be very warm and inviting, with so many hidden places offering up juicy cultural tidbits, and I would be more than happy to go back any time.

**May 24, 2012**

**'Like all great travelers, I have seen more than I remember, and remember more than I have seen.'**

— Benjamin Disraeli

**May 25, 2012**

I've found that the British have a fondness for tradition and ceremony—parades for the Queen, wigs worn in court—or perhaps very formal examinations. Back home exams are usually overseen by the professors teaching the course, and can take place in a regular classroom. Finding out examination times/places here was like a stressful game of hide and seek; the information was hidden in an extremely large and complex booklet and I had to search for it. I was pleased with myself after having figured the system out though, and forced myself to retreat out of the brilliant sunshine to revise.

Instead of a small classroom, my first exam found me in the great hall of our arts center. Walking in, we weren't allowed anything except our student card and pens. They had a coat/bag area outside the hall, and it was organized enough to make me think it was some posh club, if it weren't for the impending strenuous brain activity. Usually I am fairly relaxed about examinations, but the overall seriousness of the whole affair made me a bit nervous. The inside of the hall had a sea of little desks, each separated and individually prepped, with desks at the front of the hall for the overseers. Think Harry Potter-style examinations, except without all the magic and fires lighting the walls, and just filled with rustling papers, quiet coughs, and hands flashing across papers.

Despite all the studying obviously involved with exams, I'm glad I was able to experience them here. Last semester I only had course work for my classes, and I feel that my studying abroad experience just wouldn't have been complete without all the pomp and circumstance of a British exam.

**May 27, 2012**

Last night was the Grand Final in the Eurovision Song Contest. Perhaps I'm just musically ignorant, but I had never heard of this contest before. But, once a year, European countries offer up their best singers to compete in hopes of making a name for themselves, and of course, bragging rights for their country. Countries aren't allowed to vote for their own contestant, but you do see some sorts of alliances being made—like Latvia and Lithuania voting for each other normally (at one point I felt it was like Survivor meets the X Factor). The country that wins the competition is responsible for hosting next year's event, a serious obligation for some nations with all the current financial difficulties. It was actually rumored that Spain was instructed to lose due to the further strains winning would put on their economy.

I was pleasantly surprised by the eclectic presentation all the contestants put together—from impromptu boats made out of costumes (Turkey), curling dreadlocks across the bodice of Italy's contestant, and a dress made by Jean Paul Gaultier which looked like it sprouted wings and flew at times for the French contestant. Other memorable parts of the contest were the singing grannies, Buranovskiye Babushki, from Russia, and the twins from Ireland, 'Jedward' (combining their names Edward and Josh), who competed last year and due to their spot of glory in the past few months decided to come back to compete again looking like a couple of spaceman hedgehogs. Sadly, our own Engelbert Humperdinck from Britain came second to last, but at 76 years old and with such an awesome name (Princess Bride, anyone?) I say good effort.

The atmosphere created by everyone watching the competition was almost just as good as the competition itself. The room was just as crowded as any major football match, and people were flying their colors just as if it were one. Flags for Norway were being waved in one corner,

and several mock Jedward hairstyles were being sported in another. My energetic Swedish friend had blue and yellow paint depicting a Swedish flag on her cheek, and a Swedish jersey on. One girl, possibly under the influence of far too many pints, was feverishly updating her Facebook status every 2 seconds, before grabbing a nearby Swedish flag and dancing spasmodically with it to add to the, uh, festive feeling of it all. It was rather wonderful to realize that even though people take this competition very seriously, they're still able to joke around and have a good time.

My favorites of the night were the singing grannies, Denmark, Spain, Germany, and Sweden. But, after all the voting was finished, Sweden ended up winning. It looks like the girl with the flag had something to dance in celebration of after all.

**May 27, 2012**

**'Certainly, travel is more than the seeing of sights; it is a change that goes on, deep and permanent, in the ideas of living.'**

— Miriam Beard

**May 28, 2012**

2012 is a big year for Great Britain. Not only is it the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, but it is also the host of the 2012 Olympics. As always, there is a lot of hype leading up to the Olympics—various issues and excitements have been in the media since I've gotten here. Some people are worried London will be too congested, and worry the fears will consequently keep

individuals away and not generate enough attraction to the games. (In true calming British fashion, cartoon posters depicting commuters taking alternate routes for their everyday errands during the games are plastered along the Tube in London.) There has also been worry about the meaning of these 2012 games, as it has been mentioned that Beijing's 2008 games have no lasting legacy.

The pre-game festivities have reached all the way to us in Aberystwyth. The National Library of Wales currently has an exhibit about the Olympics, even. And once everyone here found out that the Olympic torch would be coming through the town, even more excitement was generated.

The torch was scheduled to stay at Aberystwyth overnight yesterday (the 27th), and as such, there was an extensive party planned for its arrival. A massive stage with accompanying stalls from Samsung and Coke, featuring attractions like taking a picture with a replica torch, invaded a nearby Welsh field, along with a mess of fair food stalls, and a legion of porta-potties. About half of Aberystwyth descended upon the festivities, with prowling pre-teens, university students looking for free samples, elderly couples (some looking old enough to remember the last time GB hosted the Olympics in 1948), and hoards of small children tussling in the grass.

About two hours before the arrival of the torch, bands and other entertainment took the stage to temper the rising excitement, something especially necessary after it was announced the torch would be about a half hour late. But after long last, we saw the flame bobbing up and down in the distance as it was brought forward by a group of torch-bearers in such tight synchronization you'd think they were a group of secret service protecting the president.

I was lucky enough to be right next to the fence by the stage, where it was ran past—I was tempted to take someone's cigarette and light it as they passed by, if I wasn't afraid of being

tackled for interference. After the flame was lit in the cauldron to protect the flame for the night, a group of local school kids sang in a choir, and the ceremonies were starting to wrap up. Most people though, after waiting around for so long, were more interested with making their way to the exit before there was a mass exodus trying to squeeze through the tiny barriers.

This morning the flame left Aberystwyth early in the morning, and took a route by the National Library of Wales before leaving town, and continuing its journey to the start of the Games. Even though I'm not part of Team GB, it was really wonderful to be a part of this historic event, and the pride and enthusiasm at the event yesterday was enough to at least make me feel like an honorary Brit for a day.

#### **June 4, 2012**

This weekend, all of Britain is showing their colors for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee. Shops are sporting everything from cupcakes to sunglasses painted with the Union Jack, and I even saw a Corgi with a flag t-shirt and matching collar on.

The four-day weekend is marked by a bank holiday (a simple day off given by the Queen, something I'm still wrapping my mind around) to enable everyone ample time to celebrate.

Saturday the Queen visited the Epsom Derby, as she simply loves horses. Then yesterday, in a truly amazing feat (or shall I say fleet), the Queen took part in a huge boat pageant on the Thames.

Streets all along the river were closed off as police patrolled the masses of people bedecked in patriotic garb making their way to line the river. Over 1,000 boats found their way down the river to honor the Queen's 60 years on the throne (only the second British monarch to

accomplish this, Queen Victoria being the first). I found my favorite part to be when a legion of little boats, each with a flag depicting one of the British commonwealths, dominated the river.

Another remarkable moment was when the Tower Bridge lifted open in salute as the Queen's boat passed through. This evening, thousands of people will crowd outside of Buckingham Palace as a concert, including Sir Paul McCartney, is held in the Queen's honor. Finally, Tuesday, a service of thanksgiving will take place at St. Paul's Cathedral, before a procession through the city.

It's not often that most of London is shut down (perhaps the last time being for last year's Royal Wedding); however, this weekend most definitely warrants such an occasion. And even outside of the city, people all across Britain find themselves marking the celebration with street parties and other excuses to stay away from work. I find the whole affair quite interesting—it reminds me a little of the 4th of July, with so much national pride wafting through the air. But seeing as this celebrates the occasion of a crowned ruler, as opposed to the freedom from one, there is, quite obviously, an altogether different atmosphere, one with a love for tradition and all the sparkly regalness which goes along with it. But regardless of how someone here might feel about the Queen and her lengthy rule, I say any excuse for a little bit of a party with some Victoria Sponge Cake is worth celebrating.

**June 22, 2012**

**'A good holiday is one that is spent among people whose notions of time are vaguer than yours.'**

-J B Priestley

About 85 degrees underneath an opalescent blue sky and a golden sun, I clearly was not in the UK anymore. The island I found myself having happily traveled to was the charming and ever so popular Greek Island of Corfu. The island, actually called Kerkyra to the Greeks, is a popular tourist destination, but despite all of the well-known aspects which draw individuals there, the island and its inhabitants gleefully succeed in retaining a thoroughly small-town Greek feel to the island atmosphere.

The airport, despite receiving a constant barrage of international flights, still seems like a sleepy little construction perhaps yet fully unaware of its purpose. As we were passing through customs, we found the officer, not in the little booth calling forward individuals separately for inspection, but rather in the middle of the room, calling forward the hoard of people to vaguely glance at their passport. I, being not of EU citizenship, was gestured to. He clamped onto my passport and grunted something in my direction as he continued to wave others past, me staying meekly by his side like a little puppy. After everyone had passed through, he took my passport to the booth to properly enter in the information of an outsider. I felt very special.

We were greeted with our airport transfer by a man with a cigarette dangling curiously from his mouth who drove as though being an enthusiastic Mario Andretti fan through the winding roads. The flat terrain slowly changed as craggy mountains built up around us, and for a while it seemed as though we were no longer on an island. A few short kilometers later, we arrived at our hotel at Paleokastritsa, known for being the ‘unspoilt secret’ of Corfu. Our hotel was nestled cozily halfway up a slope, with views of the surrounding mountains and bay from all directions.

The first day, we were content to simply lounge by the pool, and having settled in successfully, we searched for pool towels, but having found none, approached the reception. The

receptionist had a mess of thick curly hair piled on top of her hair, and lengthy red nails clawing their way down some list, as if taking inventory. We, under the silly delusion the reception was there to help us, approached. Inquiring if there were pool towels to check out or perhaps rent, she slowly raised her head and simply gave a thick, 'No.' Apparently our blank faces caused her to think we were a little slow in thinking, because she loudly repeated the same word, possibly extending it to 5 syllables, something I would never have thought possible for that word. We managed to drip-dry quite successfully throughout our stay.

The following day, we decided to venture a bit further afield, and at breakfast having spied a nearby beach, asked a waitress if it was possible to walk there. She calmly gave us the directions to walk about 2 kilometers and turn right, then ask if we needed help. Thinking it was simple enough, we set off in our bathing suits and flip flops. After a while, thinking perhaps we might have undertaken a foolish journey, we saw a sign informing us our hotel was 8 kilometers back. No matter how delusional one might be, there was no way their sense of distance could be as faulty as mistaking 8 for 2 kilometers, so we set back. Upon finding a bar boasting the best view of the bay, we proceeded to ask them if they knew the way to the beach. A quick look over at our party caused the man to say, 'Yes, you are young, you may make it. Take that path, maybe 10 minutes.' Elated, we clambered up the slope into the mountainous brush. A solid sense of determination drove us on as the brush closed in thicker and thicker, but after mysterious animals started scurrying around by our feet, we admitted defeat. Perhaps my only regret of the trip is not knowing how to get to that mysteriously elusive beach.

Much of our holiday seemed to find the same pattern when interacting with locals. Everything was on a vague timescale, and the outcome not necessarily a certainty. Yet everything was met with grand exaggeration and boisterous conversation. As Hollywood as it is,

the film *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* is not entirely off on all aspects. Another somewhat stereotypical reality, yet still endearingly confusing, is that every male on the island seemed to be named either Spiros, Nikos (or some variation of Niko, Nikolaus, etc.) or Costas. In fact, we had at least 3 bartenders at the hotel named Costas. I imagine when drinks start flying and requests come quickly, this could be quite confusing. Another quirk is that the Greeks seem to, erm, have difficulties with the plumbing. In nearly every toilet you see a sign announcing to put toilet paper, not in the toilet, but in a bin next to it, as the pipes are too small and will get clogged. At first this was a bit stressful, as images of flooded bathrooms with, shall I say, debris, came to mind if I failed in this task. But obviously this was not enough to ruin a holiday, and faded into just another aspect of the local culture.

Another day we ventured into the town of Corfu, a main attraction of the island. To get there, we planned to use the local buses. At the bottom of the hill near our hotel, a signpost informed us that local buses ran every two hours starting at 9:15 am, and the last bus came back at 4 pm. As the schedule did not allow for much time in the day to actually be exploring, we decided to set off at the earliest bus time. Perky under the morning sun we started waiting at 9 am, hoping to not miss it. 9:15 came and went, and our perkiness turned to worry. But by 9:45, a big green bus came lumbering down the narrow road. We got into the town slightly after 10, and by 10:15, we had made it to the new fortress, one of the main sights to see. The old town is situated between two hills, upon which the old and new fortresses sit. From the new fortress, we caught a wonderful view of all the intertwining little streets in the town, and the tops of several churches. We also spied several lizards scuttling out of the brightness and into the cool shadows. As expected, most of the town was lined with vendor stalls, all boasting the best prices on their souvenirs, and swearing to God that the rest of the vendors are all trying to swindle you.

Bargaining is almost a hobby to the Greeks, and a woeful shortcoming on my part. I was attempting to drive the price down on a leather bracelet I was interested in, which merely caused the woman to wail, 'Why you trying to cause my family to starve? This cost me so expensive!' with her hands lifted in the air as if asking for divine intervention from such a selfish tourist. We stumbled across several churches in the tangled streets, and in one I was ushered into a line by a burly Greek man, and further shepherded into a small room housing what appeared to be a sarcophagus. Slightly bemused, I tried to pull a face showing my admiration and curiosity in such a beautiful room. The man was not fooled though, and leaned his head forward in example, saying 'Kiss kiss'. I tried pretending I did not understand, which just prompted more charades, and eventually succumbed to hovering my lips a half an inch over what might be a tomb disease ridden from all the mysterious lips before me. This seemed to appease him, and he hurriedly moved me out of the way so others might slobber their appreciation in a much more exuberant manner than I.

Much closer to our hotel than the town was the renowned monastery of Paleokastritsa, about a 20 minute walk away. It was built in 1228 on the top of a hill, with sweeping views of the sea all around it. It includes an ornate sanctuary, a small museum, and even an olive oil press. Sadly, not much of the original structure remains, but the renovations have been done beautifully over the years, with crisp white walls and lush pops of color from the flowers which seem to flow over the walls and onto the ground.

It was very interesting being in Greece at the time we were, because they were preparing to elect a new government, mainly with the intent of deciding if they would stay in the Euro Zone or not. I was aware of all of this due to watching the news. However, if I had not done so, I would have no idea that this was occurring, for life in the tourist world remained as normal

with beaches visited and food and drinks served. It crossed my mind several times that the locals might find our ignorance of the issues which affect them so strongly rather irritating.

Of course, being a holiday, much of our time was consumed in eating and being lazy. The highlights for me included moussaka, a kind of Greek lasagna, and the copious amounts of feta cheese and Greek yogurt. Also popular is ouzo, a strong liquor with a pungent liquorice taste, and an even stronger punch.

Our last day was met with much sadness. The island had a sense of timelessness, with the sun providing a sort of warmth making you feel as though you've sank into golden honey with the sweet smell of the concoction of local flowers and the buzzing of all the insects. It's quite easy to see how the island was featured in the Odyssey as an island where Odysseus spent time on.

The only comfort as our plane lifted into the sky was that we were returning to slightly more stable plumbing.

**June 22, 2012**

**'The first condition of understanding a foreign country is to smell it.'**

— T.S. Eliot

**June 23, 2012**

Wimbledon—it's where the tennis is.

And it's where I found myself before returning back to America.

While the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club is an exclusive club (aspiring members must know 3 current members before they will even be eligible, and then be put on a waiting-list about 1000 individuals long) for playing all year long, starting next week, the 25th of June, the Wimbledon Championships will also take place there. For two weeks, some of the best tennis players in the world will gather to grunt it out on the courts to prove supreme mastery of the racket, and the entire area is flooded with spectators. Then, even more overwhelming this year will be the Olympics, as all the tennis matches for the games will take place in Wimbledon as well.

I must admit, my first association with Wimbledon used to be with Kirsten Dunst and Paul Bettany. But the Championships are really as big of a deal as the movie makes it out to be, with celebrities such as Jay-Z even attending to watch from time to time. I do find all of the hype rather interesting, but as I'm not entirely consumed with the idea of little balls whizzing across a court, I was up for looking around for other things to do.

Besides the tennis, Wimbledon is actually a very interesting place, with quite a rich history. While coverage of the tennis might not always indicate it, Wimbledon is only about 6 miles from the very heart of London, and only about a 20 minute Tube ride away. And while it is so close to the urban glamour, it has a quaint, almost country-esque charm to it. Between Wimbledon and Wimbledon Village rests the commons, a large sprawling area with running paths, benches, ponds, and stretches of grass filled with kids chasing after soccer balls and even some horse riding. Just past the commons is Cannizaro House, a massive mansion-like house over 300 years old which is now a hotel, complete with maze-like gardens that make you want to get lost in them.

Walking a bit further, you can find the Wimbledon Windmill, which was built in 1817 and now houses a little museum. Another, slightly more hidden area of interest is the Buddhapadipa Temple, a beautifully ornate Buddhist temple tucked away in the residential area, and despite having to look a little bit harder for it, definitely worthy of a visit.

To me, Wimbledon is a wonderful example of how diverse London is; in a span of just a few miles you can go from a palace to skyscrapers to a cozy temple. But also, it displays the wonderful British trait that no matter how close of proximity a place might be to something else famous, they still wish to leave their own mark. As I wasn't able to stay to witness the renowned tennis, I settled for the consolation of sipping a Pimm's cup, a fruity drink common in the summer and at events like tennis and croquet, and a perfect way to end a sunny afternoon.

**June 23, 2012**

**'What I was really hanging around for, I was trying to feel some kind of a good-by. I mean I've left schools and places I didn't even know I was leaving them. I hate that. I don't care if it's a sad good-by or a bad good-by, but when I leave a place I like to know I'm leaving it. If you don't, you feel even worse.'**

— J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*

**June 29, 2012**

I've been back in America a little over a week now.

The culture shock started as early as my flight from Amsterdam to Atlanta. On one side of me was a mother hoarding a large rucksack filled with vacuum sealed packages of Pop-Tarts and beef jerky, passing it out to her children and glaring at others as if there would be a famine on the flight and she must provide for her offspring. On the other side of me was a man in a Texas Cowboy's baseball cap and a shirt with an American flag on the front. Both were extremely interested in small talk. These were things I had not experienced for quite some time.

Touching back down on American soil, I realized how much I had missed cheap Mexican food, free refills on beverages, and stores that stay open past 4pm on a Sunday. I realized how much I had not missed public Bluetooth conversations that cause people to look like they're yelling at you, a lack of efficient public transportation, and country music. The sun seems much closer in the sky, and I had partially forgotten the enormity of the concrete deserts which are our parking lots. What were all of these movies filling the cinemas I hadn't even had the privilege of seeing trailers for? And where, for the love of God, were all the queues?

Falling into rhythm with a place takes a bit of time, but it's amazing how stealthily a total-body takeover can occur, leaving you foreign in your home nation. At times I still have to do a double-take as I plug in my laptop because the cord looks small without an adapter. And at dinner the other night I tried to order just beans on a jacket potato, and got a plain baked potato with a funny look on the side instead.

Nerd that I am, I subscribe to Conde Nast Traveler. It's one of my favorite travel magazines, and recently it's been focusing a lot on the UK because of the Jubilee and the Olympics and everything going on this year. Paging through an issue, I saw a large piece on the Shoreditch area of London, talking about how it's the new hipster area, symbolizing all the

growth and diversity in London and the UK. *Yeah, cool.* I thought, my mental map thinking it was still close and accessible to me, instead of across an ocean.

I'm sure it won't take me too long to catch up with America. The jet lag is already gone, and my fingers can deftly count out US change again. But I still started a new list of where I want to visit. First line: Shoreditch.

**June 29, 2012**

**'We shall not cease from exploration**

**And the end of all our exploring**

**Will be to arrive where we started**

**And know the place for the first time.'**

— T.S. Eliot

## Creative Piece

### A Pervasive Disposition

‘Certainly, travel is more than the seeing of sights; it is a change that goes on, deep and permanent, in the ideas of living.’ ~ Miriam Beard

A place like Corfu, Greece made it hard not to believe in Greek Gods. The pale opalescent sky seemed translucent enough to give way straight to the heavens, and the sun was so dazzling that one could imagine the only way it could create such an impact was if it were drawn by Apollo. It was much more thrilling to believe the riot of colors from the sea, rocks, and plants were the same that played out in the famous Greek myths. Perhaps it was the heat, or my partial dehydration, but the island held me in an almost contradictory sense of timelessness. From where I sat, eyes closed and relaxing on a bench, the sea and an old fortress faced me. I was enveloped in a sort of honey-sweet midday warmth, believing that I was just as everything that had come before me. And then behind I heard the loud wailing of a coach’s horn, honking at the young tourists speeding by in motorbikes. It was as if Neverland was penetrated.

I have become a connoisseur of hotel rooms and houses, four-poster beds and pull-outs over the years. Moving was a byproduct of my childhood, and traveling was a perk. But both occurrences instilled a great curiosity for our world’s unknown, and perhaps a slight sense of wanderlust. When I finally had the opportunity to be stationary four consecutive years for my university education, I predicted it would be a welcome rest. Instead, a few months in, I began to entertain the idea of spending a year studying abroad. And then that mere entertaining became

full-fledged planning. The book, *If You Give A Moose A Muffin* is largely applicable to my life when it comes to traveling—if you give me an opportunity to travel, I'll want a side-trip too. Rather than diminish my curiosity, each new trip heightens my interest in the similarities and cultures across the globe. There would be more than enough to see in the UK, the site of my educational experience abroad, for the year. However, when promotional deals from travel agencies popped into my inbox, it was hard to say no. And so, on an almost spontaneous whim, I found myself booking a holiday to Greece.

The Old Town of Corfu is relatively small in size, considering its importance to the island over the years. Flanking either end is the Old Fort and the New Fort, astutely named, based on one being older and one being newer. Over the years, the city underwent much Venetian, along with some French and English, influence. The jumble of architecture, hidden garden squares, and eclectic mix of restaurants attest to this mingling of culture.

Walking through the city lends sightseers to stumble upon an old church about every few feet, and numerous vender stalls, both equally energetic enterprises. As I passed one church, beautifully ornate in the Greek Orthodox style, I spied a baptism taking place. Noting that other sightseers were peeking in, I decided to also invade on this spiritually important event for my personal entertainment. No sooner had I passed through the door than a large man with a scrawny, pointed beard ushered me into a line of people. Thinking it was a way to keep order inside the sanctuary, I complied. Soon though, I noticed the line was steadily moving into a smaller room. I tried to back out, but several lyrical grunts from the man caused me to think it would simply be better to follow his wishes, and I quickly got led into a smaller room off to the side. As my eyes adjusted to the dimmer lighting, I tried to find bits of finery in the space to gaze upon in appreciation, hoping to emote an expression showing an appreciation for such

splendor. To my utter horror, the man did not find this sufficient, as he gestured to the sarcophagus in front of me, puckering his lips and practically moaning, “Keees, keeees.” Fearing I would not be allowed out of the room until I did so, I quickly brushed my lips about a millimeter above the gold surface, hoping this would look like an adequate smooch and save me from any diseases teeming across the surface of what was probably some dead man’s holy island resting place. (Since my trip, I have found out that this is indeed, St. Spiridon’s church, which houses the tomb of the island’s patron saint).

It is inevitable, when traveling to a tourist destination, to get caught up in some tourist traps. After all, they are famous for a reason. While I appreciate finding my own hole-in-the-wall-best-pizza-I-ever-tried restaurant, there’s no denying that if thousands of feet have padded along a path before you, there might be some point of interest. After my brief dead-man encounter, I found myself in this situation. I had come to one of the largest attractions on the island that day, the town, to experience some of the richer and more diverse history and culture the island had to offer. Inside the town, the forts and a church were also on the top to-do list (This was a bit of a riddle to me, like an attraction within an attraction. Imagine if you will, someone advertising hot fudge on their hot fudge sundae). I had seen the forts, climbed to the tops of their towers, and noted the undeniable beauty of the surrounding bay and view of the mazelike town below. But being almost an overrated tourist destination, I found there was a lack of exploration to undertake; no unknown bistros, covered up paths, or locals who hadn’t seen a foreigner in ten years. These are the things I relish most in traveling, and could not find on the island’s most publicized destination.

Instead, I found myself wandering along one of the many narrow alleys lined with souvenir stalls. When I go to a foreign country, my favorite shopping usually revolves around

local grocery stores. Ordinary, unpretentious, with an air of I'm-not-changing-for-anyone, grocery stores seem to exude local culture in a way no other shop can, maybe because food is probably our most fundamental consumer product. And at a grocery store you notice from birth onward how the locals satiate this basic desire, whether it is tins of lamb mush baby food or shelves upon shelves of variations of chilled yogurt. However, in my family it is considered a basic sin to come home from a holiday empty-handed and easy gift ideas can't always be found amongst groceries. After a while, I noticed that most shops had merchandise along the same lines: olive wood carvings, leather, scarves, jewelry, olive oil or soap made of olive oil, and the typical shot glass/mug/t-shirt with the destination emblazoned on the front.

Choosing to settle on the next shop for simplicity, I spotted a leather bracelet, a safe bet as far as souvenirs go. I began examining it, noting its similarities and differences to its peers, and debating whether or not I could drive the price down. Bargaining, in Greece, is not merely customary, it's almost a hobby. Walking around, noting two Greeks engaged in bartering, you can see the over-dramatized hardship on both the vendor and the buyer, and the gleaming satisfaction in both of their eyes when they reach a final deal. Personally, I am not a very aggressive haggler. I usually dislike arguing so much I'll just pay the asking price. But today I decided to give it a try, so when the kindly woman approached me, asking for 12 Euros, I put on a face of suffering and asked for her best price. She clucked her tongue, looking at the exquisite craftsmanship, 'I can only do 12, my friend. This is a beautiful piece.'

'It is, but I don't have enough money left to pay that and buy the rest of my family gifts. Can you do 5?' I countered.

Immediately, she threw up her hands, as if asking supplication from the heavens, and shook her messy curls violently. ‘Why you want to make me staaaarve? This cost me so expensive Euros. This is eempossible!’

‘Mmm. Yes, I see it is nice quality,’ I replied, nodding my head, ‘But perhaps 8 Euros can be enough?’

‘Ay! No! No. It must not be lower than 10!’ She wailed, as if I were asking her children to start begging on the street.

Undoubtedly, a more seasoned bargainer than I might have wrangled a better deal. But as it was, I couldn’t imagine a little Costas somewhere, malnourished with his collar bones protruding, so I gave in. And bracelet aside, I could see how people get hooked on the whole experience. It’s not necessarily the price that matters, but the bonding over the problems of the world. Both parties are saying, ‘Look, life sucks for me too right now, I need a good deal!’ And somehow through the struggle each side gives and takes a little. We all like to complain a little, don’t we? Or at least, this is what I placated myself with as I ambled away, hoping I had not been ripped off.

My skin felt greasy and sloppy from sunscreen, but tight and crusty from a thin layer of dried saltwater residue. It was an interesting combination. Practically classifying as albino, I had to take extra precautions whenever somewhere the average person returns from with a beautiful golden tan. But lying idly on the beach made it hard to care too much about those sort of things. I had entered that wonderfully sleepy state that comes from being subjected to way too much sun and heat, and a healthy amount of walking. In a Garden of Eden, I reminded myself

not to eat the forbidden fruit—wasting my holiday. Half reluctantly, I peeled myself up from the warm smooth rocks, and stretched.

In front of me lay what is said to be Paleokastritsa's best beach. Already on what is considered the 'unspoiled part' of Corfu, Paleokastritsa, while still touristy, boasts a slightly more rugged and authentic beach life than other areas of the island. The sandy expanse wrapped around in a crescent moon shape, with rocky hills on either end. Continuing a bit past one area of the main beach hid several cave-like grottos for the more adventurous swimmers, but as I have difficulty not injuring myself simply walking on flat ground and fancied going home largely unscathed, I resigned to stay away from them. Instead, I remained on the well-visited beach.

I'm not fortunate enough to permanently live near a beach I can swim at, so when there's one around, I choose that over a pool. I've been to Hawaii, and 'oooooo'ed over the silky white sand that clung to my body on those beaches, and even been to Australia, where I saw ocean-life more vibrant than a Mardi Gras parade. The thing I've learned though is that it's impossible to compare beaches. Here, the sand was a curious mixture of sand and rock, both comforting and painful to walk across. The water was a clear, bright azure, translucent enough to see the rocks below and whether they were covered in seaweed or not, even if looking at it from far away. Yet at the same time, it was numbingly cold. I loved that it was all a reminder that even though we might traipse across the beach and claim our spots there, we did not own it, or control it.

I gingerly picked my way across the pebbles as they grew larger and smoother, leading me to the sea, and timidly placed my toes into the ebbing waves. A few feet in front of me I saw tiny fish darting about, like traces of silver in the water. Experience told me the water would be no less difficult to get into if I waited, so I dived in. Or at least, I kind of jumped and splashed into the shallows until it was deep enough to swim out.

A lot of people go to beaches because of the social aspect. They can spend time with friends, make new friends, talk, laugh, and have a large expanse of generally flat land to scope out who might be around. I, however, find that watching people is far more interesting when you're a bit further out swimming, and looking back toward the beach. You get a panoramic view of what everyone is doing, all framed by the landscape behind them. My stage was set with a hilly backdrop, villas in sherbet pink and buttercup yellow plopped across the greenery like enticing candies. Directly behind the beach a road cut through, with small shops and restaurants advertising, 'Moussaka! Great pub bear and free Euro 2012 watch!' (Part of me wanted to explain the great difference an e and an a might make on a sign, between a beverage and a large aggressive animal). And center stage was all the sunbathing beauties, slathered up with suntan oil until their bodies were glistening. Being a European beach, naturally there were many topless women, their great brown leathery torsos attesting to the freedom from tops they have experienced over many years. One mother was angrily gesturing to someone who had come to collect money for the family using one of the beach's sun beds. With no sign posted about a price for the chairs, the mom was obviously irate her little darlings had to muck about on the hot ground. Nearby a lonely lad in his early twenties shot an annoyed look at the tussling kids, but wasted no more time in hunting the grounds for any attractive young females. Having spotted two women a bit further down, he casually began to walk by. A group of slightly younger teenagers approached from the opposite direction, taking the opposite tactic as well, calling out (presumably) crude things in Greek to the lovely ladies.

It doesn't matter where you are, human habits are the same. We complain, fight, flirt, and play, regardless of what our passports tell us we are. The other bonus about social scanning

from the water is that when it becomes enough, you can just swivel your body in the water and immediately have a completely different scene.

I swirled 180 degrees through the waves, treading water to keep my body moving and the numbing effects of the water at bay. Behind me was a bustling microcosm of human interaction. But, if I only concentrated on the rugged beauty in front of me, I could just imagine that I was floating on my own, allowing the fish to gently nibble at my feet in a secluded cove on an island yet untouched by civilization. The solitude and isolation were something to delusionally embrace, here amongst such raw nature. But even so, it was comforting to know that a few feet back at the shore I would be welcomed back by people just as human and unimpressive in the grandness of the world as me.

The odor of stale, used diaper filled my nose, and there wasn't anything I could do about it. Usually, I am a happy flier. I love the systematic orderliness of checking in, the feeling of ease once all of my baggage whizzed away on the conveyer belt, and knowing that as I sat and did absolutely nothing as my body hurtled thousands of miles above the ground I would be served perfectly portioned, packaged food. I don't even mind turbulence. Sure, it would be natural to be slightly disgruntled with the aircraft taking me away from my Greek island paradise, but I was content with my holiday and that wasn't what had put me in an irritable mood. What I loathe is when people get in the way of the perfectly balanced system. Idiots who pack sharp objects in their carry-ons and hold up security, befuddled individuals who try boarding in business class when their ticket is for economy and begin complaining about discrimination. And babies—they pretty much always alter the equation. From bouncing on

overcrowded laps to screaming as their little ears pop from altering pressure, I have concluded babies are simply not meant for flying. Naturally all of these were present on my flight back to the UK.

A double-whammy on this flight: teenagers fresh from their first European walkabout scattered throughout the plane. What I could gather from snippets of conversation was that a travel agent, probably sloppily and at the last minute, booked everything for them and they did not have seats next to one another. As a result, the whole plane suffered as they scampered over passengers, passing coloring books (which obviously say 'I'm a mature, cultured young adult') and gossiping to pass the time. One particularly titchy looking girl with skin peeling from too much sun in the south of France scabbled the headrest in front of me to gain balance as she tight-rope walked across the armrest to her seat in the middle, disrupting my miniature TV-viewing, as well as the slumbering man in front of me.

At times when external distractions are just too much and there is no possibility of physically altering my location, the last retreat is my thoughts. I suppose everyone gets overly contemplative after hours of sleep deprivation and close quarters, thinking that their trials have made them more insightful into the nature and purpose of human existence. I also won't pretend I was an exception to this. And so my thoughts tumbled around in my head in competition with the chaos in the cabin.

Beyond the methodical ease of flying, I realized I loved it for the exhibit of raw human behavior it seemed to force out of normally otherwise civilized individuals. I enjoy a cute chimp on the Discovery channel as much as the next person, but I find observing people much more intriguing. Bring them slightly outside their normal comfort zone of home, and it gets even more interesting.

Everyone around me was not at home. Some were going home (Indeed, a girl three rows back, ecstatic about the possibility of finally being able to update her Facebook status upon the wheels touching the tarmac attesting to this.) and some were leaving home. I like peeking at passports while in line at immigration to see who might be coming or going, based on destination and origin of the flight, but even that doesn't really mean anything. I grew up moving every two to three years, with schools and houses changing more rapidly than some people commit to a gym. So when people asked where home was for me, I had a much more flexible concept, being from the hotel where I might be sleeping that night, to where my mom grew up and we still had family.

So I suppose, to me, perpetual motion was home; traveling was home. If you looked at me strangely when I told you I had been living out of a suitcase for five months, I would look at you just as oddly if you said you had marks running up your wall showing how tall you were each year. There's a sense of normalcy as I clutch a boarding pass, but I realize this is not the case for everyone. Then I wondered the overwhelming purpose behind all of us souls on the plane. I looked to my right and see a quiet fellow in an expensive, silky suit, and imagine him to be on a business merger. He's slightly uncomfortable because it's his first one and he wants to impress the boss, and branching out like this is his way of proving himself. Mostly obscured by the seats in front of me, I saw the tops of a couple's heads, his arm poking out into the aisle and her fingers slowly tracing it. They're on their honeymoon, bitten by the travel bug but even more bitten by love and they'll only really remember half of the sights they've seen. And on my far left was a wispy-haired woman, maybe in her sixties. She changed into slippers and is sitting quietly reading a paperback with yellow-aged pages, perhaps on her way to see her grandkids who live too far away.

Despite the overwhelming airline fees, everyone conquered price or inconvenience for some reason or the other. Those kids coming back from France probably posed in front of the Eiffel Tower, and I prayed to God they noticed the history and architecture as well as how jealous it would make their friends back home. But even then, they're connecting. They're finding a part of them become a part of something so many other people have experienced before, and bringing it back with them, even if it's just for slightly juvenile reasons. And I bet, even the people who sit cramped in their seats hating every minute of the flight, still would say there was a good reason they did it.

No longer Greek-infused sparkly and clear, the weather greeted me back to the UK nonetheless in its own non-raining cheerful British sort of way. With a croissant and coffee to go, I traveled about thirty minutes to the Northwest area of Neasden in London.

The Tube entrance immediately set a slight feeling of disrepair, with no automatic ticket machines, and a high-rise looking on that had three quarters of the windows smashed out, clearly uninhabited except for perhaps a feral cat or two. I hadn't necessarily previously planned on traveling to this particular part of London, but a quip in the evening newspaper the day before about a Hindu temple prompted this semi-spontaneous trip.

The houses around me were a dramatic difference from the posh, million-pound tidy townhouses surrounding the Tube station of South Kensington where I started my morning. I walked on an overpass through a six-lane road, as per the road sign's directions, telling me I only had a ten minute walk to the temple. The neighborhood had a feeling of neglect that said the government had long since concentrated on the area, but the residents still managed a feeling of

pride in the upkeep. The squat, two-story attached houses were distinguished by varying shades of peeling pastel paint, and an occasional fresh coat of white. On several there were plastic strands of bunting, but in one window a large hand-painted sign said, 'Stuff the Jubilee!', referring to the recently celebrated anniversary of the Queen's reign.

The newspaper had said the temple was an impressive sight, standing proudly above the line of houses. As I plodded through the quiet streets, the only thing I saw with great difference was the Wembley Football Stadium to my left in the distance, its large metal arc trailing above it like some robotic rainbow. As I crossed the road a man trimming his hedges paused to look up and smile. My first human contact.

I had just about given up hope of finding the temple, despite the fact that I had been following the signs faithfully. This didn't look as though it were where an internationally recognized landmark would stand. But then, just down the road, I spotted a long stretch of high-security looking fence. Upon coming closer, I saw I was passing a grocery store focused on the Indian vegetarian variety, with a very large parking lot (something highly uncommon in London, even in the outskirts of the city), probably a mutually successful enterprise for the individuals visiting both the store and the temple.

I knew the temple was open to visitors as well as for those coming for regular faith purposes, so I wasn't concerned with gaining entry. Nonetheless, I decided to wander the perimeter of the property before going inside just to see what it was like. The main entrance was positioned directly in front of the Mandir, the main part of the temple. Seven white domed pinnacles reached from the roof, composing a sort of mountainscape amidst the city. Large stone steps led a path from the building to the gate, which was composed of equally intricate architecture. From a quick Google search the night before, I found out that this temple was the

first traditional Hindu stone temple in Europe, completely constructed with traditional methods and imported materials. It took several years to complete, but it was finally inaugurated by the spiritual leader of the temple's organization (BAPS—Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha), Pramukh Swami Maharaj, in 1995. Since then, the temple has had visits from even Prince Charles and Princess Diana.

Across the road I spotted the Swaminarayn School, meant for an independent Hindu education. The students there learn Hindu language, music, or other aspects of culture integrated into a more secular education of math, science, etc. Despite a relatively small attendance, the school is known for extremely high test scores, and philanthropic endeavors. But from the outside to an unknowing observer, the school looks like any other gated posh private school.

The main entrance was closed; they probably only opened it for special occasions. So I walked toward the open side entrance. A sign said I had to deposit my purse with security, and I got a little ticket stub to exchange for it as I left. The kindly gate guards stood by a little booth, and directed me toward the visitors' entrance, at a door in the Haveli, a cultural center attached to the Mandir. Its architecture was equally beautiful, but slightly more understated, with a flat roof and warm brown wood creating a sort of awning and flanking the entrance.

Right away I was faced with metal detectors upon entering the building. As welcoming as the people were, it was clear they wanted to protect their place of worship. I was informed that women and men were required to take off their shoes and place them in separate rooms to the right and left of the metal detectors, respectively. Bare-footed, I wandered in the cavernous room to the small gift shop situated in the center. Miniature statues of Hindu gods smiled cheekily up at me. Most of the rooms in the Haveli were closed off—only opened for functions.

I was welcomed to go look at the exhibit, 'Understanding Hinduism', and the main shrine inside of the Mandir.

It wasn't that I was contemplating converting to Hinduism, nor was I there for some cheap titillation. And although I had seen the temple advertised as a point of attraction in London, the relatively empty rooms made it clear this was not the most frequented, 'touristy' area. Still, I found myself drawn to this, a place imbued with such intense devotion and particular culture.

A tall, narrow marble staircase led up and curved to the shrine. It wasn't oppressive, but that large blanket of silence that seems to be present in any house of worship descended on me as I climbed upwards. A small group of sadhus (Hindu monks) were sat cross-legged at the top, chatting in hushed tones. I passed them with a faint smile.

The shrine was arranged so that an alter with a murtis (image of the Hindu deities) was situated below each pillar. A couple was sitting on their knees in the large, open middle part of the room, praying. I walked counter-clockwise, reading the placards about the murtis. I was slightly proud of myself for recognizing Ganesha, the elephant-headed man, known as a god of success. Further along I was caught by the placard depicting Hanuman. I recognized this name as the pet monkey in the film, *A Little Princess*, and grinned at the story depicting this god as slightly mischievous but fiercely loyal.

As I turned the corner to look at the last wall of the shrine, a blot of tangerine orange caught my eye. There was a slight indent to the back of the room, holding what looked like another alter. Perched inside, completely still, was another sadhus, his skin eerily white and translucent in the semi-darkness, with bright blue eyes looking out of the darkness almost like a

cat might. I stared for a moment, one foot moved forward mid-step, thinking he was a statue. Then I realized he was, in fact, alive, and was quite glad I did not scream out in surprise.

I hurried out of the shrine, and down a staircase opposite the one I entered before I offended anyone. Quickly gathering up my shoes and purse, I stepped back out under the cloudy British sky. Perhaps the clouds pressing down or the location of the temple contributed to the feeling of isolation, but being inside of the building was almost like transporting your body—inside I didn't feel like I was on UK soil at all.

People in expensive suits and designer heels walked slightly faster than me, overtaking my strides, not so much walking across the bridge on the Thames as flying across it. Clearly these individuals belonged in the city. They had work to do. Sometimes I prided myself when I blended into places that weren't strictly my home. Asia, for example, was pretty much always a no-go with my blonde hair acting as a beacon of foreignness. But in Britain, I was slightly less conspicuous. One day, I must have looked even more at ease as I stepped out of an Underground station, as a person, sounding as if they were from northern England, but an out-of-towner nonetheless, asked me for directions to a particular street. I was startled, and sad to explain I was not from around the area, but flattered all the same. Sometimes I wonder why we seem to do that—at times feel unique if we are different, and at other, shrink in shame. Perhaps part is due to annoying stereotypes of loud Americans eating McDonalds while abroad in their white tennis shoes. But I'd like to think it's more than that.

In addition to the briefcases flying by, there were other individuals harder to place, perhaps young college students, retirees, mothers out to buy groceries, and who knows else, all

camouflaged by rain slickers and bland expressions. And then on the other end of the spectrum were the obvious tourists, cameras documenting the slow progression across the bridge. One jumbled group was a French school group on an excursion, huddled close together. A little ways away was a pod of Japanese, enthusiastically taking pictures of the water below. For some reason there was a person dressed in a mask mimicking the Queen, with an overly-plush velvet robe, waving at everyone part regal royalty and part cheesy Burger King.

The Millennium Bridge was a clever idea to look like a 'blade of light' connecting one side of London to the other, and allowing pedestrians a way to cross the Thames unhindered. On one side, the Tate Modern museum, housed in the old Bankside Power Station, looks on. Close by, Shakespeare's Globe still stands, squat and resolute. As pedestrians walk toward the opposite bank, St. Paul's Cathedral is framed directly ahead. The bridge takes people from historic literature and modern art, to traditional worship used as a place for long-standing revered royal ceremonies. On one bank, renovation of industry for the humanities, and on the other bank, perennial religion in a building rebuilt in the late seventeenth century after the Great Fire of London.

I think that's why I love big cities; the past and present mesh together in a jumble of civilization. It's easy to slip from one part to another, largely anonymous in the throngs of people and move between the collages of pockets of culture. Then, barring a Big Mac in one hand and white Nikes on my feet, people might not wonder why this American came around, and instead just see me as just another person. As we travel, we still place stereotypes, as we seem to do in life. Our little brains can't seem to handle ambiguities, and like simple classifications. How do we define 'tourist'? Does it have to be someone who goes somewhere to see sights? I know plenty of individuals who have gone on holiday and stayed at a beach, ignorant of their

surroundings and perfectly content. On the flip side, I know people who move to live in an area of their home nation and explore the local culture.

I find home to be an odd combination of heritage, circumstance, and choice. We undoubtedly speak a certain language, or perhaps have certain physical attributes based on where we were born. But we can't help where we were brought into this world. And then there's immigration. Being American, perhaps I should have insight into our great melting pot. Increasingly though, immigration isn't something only synonymous with New York after the great Potato Famine, or along the US-Mexico border. Sometimes it boils down to better work opportunities, or that particular day your passport went up for its work visa against a new immigration law. And all of that battles our urges to be in places that we can identify and feel comfortable in, even if that deviates from the traditional.

The little kebab places on the corner, the Chinatowns and bangle shops at Mini India, they're all little carved out niches—a home in a new home. Sometimes people travel for asylum or jobs, but in all cases, it's because they're looking for a bit of themselves they can't find where they're at. And when they find it, sometimes they hold on, even if they need to build a little bit of their past into their new home.

Perhaps that is why I feel such a calling to traveling. I definitely have a multitude of European ethnicities coursing through my veins, so why not explore most of the continent to get in touch with my roots? I grew up forced to move often, until the pace of relocation did not seem like an unwelcome departure from everything I knew but rather an opportunity to round out my sense of belonging in a new place. And eventually I evolved into my own breed of gypsy, finding my home, well, everywhere. As long as a place welcomed me by allowing for even one shade of identification and a pinch of excitement, it was where I belonged. This, I think, is what

makes all the buses and planes and cars and feet whisk on every beaten and unbeaten path in the world—the chance to find out who they are and another home away from home...or two or three...and what these homes mean to the rest of the world.

Anthropologists can say what they'd like about civilization. When I look around me, I still see nomadic tribes, ever-evolving pods of people linked in similarities. I heard 8 dongs ringing out from Big Ben through the drizzle, telling everyone good evening, and welcome home.

## Project Reflection and Analysis

At the beginning of my project, I had a much different opinion of blogs. I used to think of blogs more as online diaries. It is wonderful that producing writing is a realistic endeavour for anyone who wishes to do so. However, I believe that there is a time and a place for certain thoughts, and perhaps it is not necessary to unleash all of your innermost thoughts and feelings on the internet with no sort of safety net to catch certain things. Therefore, when I decided to keep a blog as part of my project, I began it with a certain mindset that I wished to focus very much on the place I was writing about, and try to minimize some of my personal feelings and experiences. I also did not want it to be dry rhetoric, with merely facts about a place—people could go to numerous websites for such information. Taking that into consideration, I tried to strike a balance between articulate information and a memorable voice, focusing on a specific place, and interjecting my personal impressions on the area, and perhaps an entertaining anecdote or two. In my blog, I also tried to keep the majority of photos organized separately from my writing, as I wanted the writing to be the main focus, and not allow a reader to become overwhelmed with images. Occasionally, I also included a quote pertaining to travel writing or somehow also related to events which happened. I often feel looking to work of others is inspiring and find joy in recognizing a point someone else has made through their words, but I have not yet been able to articulate.

I feel that overall, writing blogs allowed me to become freed up in my writing. Often when I write, I become very consumed with the task, shutting myself off from the rest of the world. Blogs are meant to be quick free writes, almost whatever you think of off the top of your

head. I also kept in mind that blogs are meant to be short posts for people to read. Therefore, I didn't want to concentrate on creating a large portrait of what I experienced, but rather a short snapshot. I feel through this, I produced much more writing than if I had restrained myself to only producing a few longer pieces. Also, I did not think too long or plan what I would write, so therefore I actually found myself writing things about observations I hadn't consciously made. Another beneficial thing was that in my blogs, I wished to include hyperlinks to websites further explaining or giving information on certain things I mentioned. Because of this, I found myself doing a lot more background research, and gaining a lot of insight into the place I was writing on. This gave me a much more well-rounded understanding of my subject matter.

The kind of writing I produced for my blog (hyperlinks excluded) would be the sort of work that a travel magazine promoting travel might publish. Often, magazines, such as the popular publication *Conde Nast Traveler*, include a few moderate length, or longer length pieces which deal with a person's personal experiences in an area. They do so to further engage the reader in the traveler's experience, and hopefully motivate a reader to undertake the travel as well. This style of writing could then be tweaked and manipulated slightly depending on the style of the publication.

When preparing to write my longer piece, I decided that it would be more appropriate to write about more personal experiences. A piece of this length is not often posted to a blog, and therefore is not readily available to anyone on the internet, and not meant to be read extremely quickly. In addition I decided to focus much more on employing literary techniques, namely imagery to describe the setting, and much more voice. I also decided to include a lot of personal thought, and not much dialogue in my piece. The thinking behind this was that I feel a lot of impressions are made while travelling and a lot of personal understanding is a result of this.

However, this is often a result of inner thoughts, and usually not directly something one conveys to others travelling with them. It is, if you will, the inner journey that accompanies the external journey.

This leads to how I chose the topic of the piece. Obviously, the physical travel which takes place occurs in several different areas: a Greek island, a plane, and London. The separate scenes are meant to not only reflect a separate physical location, but also a separate mental state, one which builds upon itself throughout the piece. The time-lapse between the beginning and end scene is not substantial, but it allows for the reader to have an adequate and realistic sense of how one might go through such a mental process. The topic itself is meant to reflect the focus of my research paper—the fact that individuals do not necessarily travel just for travel's sake, but for a larger motivation and so that through travel one might experience a new understanding about who they are as a person and how they might connect with other people regardless of culture or other barriers.

This kind of writing might also be published by a travel magazine. Occasionally, if it is fitting for a themed-issue, an article of this style might be published for its overall message. Otherwise, this work could very well be published in a literary journal, especially if it is a travel-themed literary journal. I also view the content and style of this article to be a stepping stone to other career options beyond simple travel writing. As it begins focusing on larger issues beyond physical travel, and what might relate to people across borders, it opens up the audience of the work.

This project has allowed me to further explore various styles of travel writing, and has honed my interest. I would very much like to continue along the lines of my larger piece and

focus on writing about issues which might be more suited for certain forms of journalism or other writing for organizations which might promote specific causes.

I believe in the transformative power of travel and in the persuasive power of words. I have personally seen both writing and travel inspire, alter, and inform individuals. It's not a great leap, then, to see how I believe in the impact of travel writing. I believe travel writing can be about more than shallow tourist guides and also search through cultures and personal stories to detail more significant issues. By going to different areas of the globe, individuals might gain a better understanding of the challenges, injustices faced in everyday life that might be unique to a certain region, such as the sex industry prominent in various regions, or ubiquitous challenges like child hunger. It is these sorts of travels which don't just encourage individuals to travel for personal enjoyment as a tourist, but also to travel to gain more global awareness.

Through writing such as this, it is possible to show that individuals do have personal reasons to travel and gather personal stories or memories. However, it also establishes the idea that travelling allows individuals to access a common thread of self-understanding and universal understanding to realize that all human beings are connected and alike at the base of their condition.

Therefore, I believe that my style of writing has changed somewhat through this creative project. I have encountered many various styles of writing (some that I have not enjoyed so much, and some of whose authors I find worthy of emulating), and have tried to produce various styles myself. Through it, I have gained a much better understanding of the genera, and the numerous purposes and platforms upon which travel writing might be expressed. But also, I

have found which styles and purposes suit me better, and would therefore like to focus on more in the future.