

Ticket to Romance
by Joshua K. Hartshorne

“I thought you were just going to take me to a restaurant or something,” Helen said, looking at the two round-trip trans-Atlantic tickets.

“Too usual and too close by,” I said. She had been working in the States for the past 6 months while I’d been on a project in Siberia. After such a long separation, I owed her something a little more exciting than a meal. I wanted luxury, glamour and comfort. I wanted adventure in an exotic capital of a great empire. Dinner, wine and a Tiffany ring weren’t going to cut it – though I planned to include all. After all, I wanted her to say yes.

Some might have picked Vienna, others Rome, but I wanted *comfort*, which does not include deciphering menus and maps. There was only one place we were going, and that was London.

The first step had been planning the trip, which took months. Helen, being more organized by far than I, typically plans our trips. My duties stop at buying the plane tickets and carrying the luggage. This time, when I handed her the tickets, it was part of a package including hotel, theater and the London *Lonely Planet* (which was actually her copy, but who’s counting?).

We arrived in comfortable Heathrow Airport mid-morning after a long non-stop trans-Atlantic flight. Having seen British Airways’ expensive seats before, I had hoped to swing something in the front of the plane but blanched when I saw the price. On the hotel, though, I spared no expense.

Before the hotel, though, there was getting to the hotel. The first London “sight” was the line of black cabs outside baggage claim. Quintessentially London, riding in a black cab was for Helen nearly worth the trip itself, and, as their expanded interior is far more convenient for baggage than tossing it in the usual US cab’s trunk. The privilege of driving such a cab is not cheap – it takes years of study to pass the rigorous entrance exam, requiring memorizing not only 25,000 streets but the fastest paths along them. Riding in a black cab is comparatively inexpensive.

I had given Helen reviews of the hotel ahead of. I had spent months online researching five-star hotels – London has many – and the Bentley was the only one without a single bad review. It is universally loved and, judging by the pictures, I expected it to be as posh as circumstances dictated. Just as important, it cozy and local, and inconspicuous from the outside, rather than a garish, monstrous chain. An escape to London is less exotic when shared with hundreds of business travelers in the Marriot.

Even after all my research I was worried I’d made the wrong choice until we were shown to our room. More spacious than my current apartment, heavily-curtained and chandeliered, it was as luxurious as Siberia isn’t. The gold-and-marble bathroom came equipped with an in-room Jacuzzi. The bed had possibly the world’s lushest covers (I don’t know for sure, but I wouldn’t mind checking) and more pillows than I cared to count, which were rearranged tastefully twice daily by the maid.

The room, though, was not the reason I picked the Bentley. Having rested from our Trans-Atlantic flight, we were shortly on our way to the next item on the itinerary, just a few floors down: the (complementary!) Turkish bath (by appointment only). The caretakers described it inaccurately as “similar to a Russian *banya*.”

I have been to a number of *banyas*, and here is how I would describe one: A *banya* is a small wood shack heated by a wood stove, which simultaneously boils water. More water is sprinkled into the fire in order to ramp up the humidity. Users sit on benches as long as they can stand the heat, beating each other with birch branches, then run outside to douse themselves in cold water (or jump in the snow, if there is any around, or into holes cut in a frozen lake and jump into that).

Here is how Maura of the Bentley Spa described their bath: “Our Hamam has been described as an oasis of dove - grey marble with four gold faucets, overflowing conches, a central oval treatment slab, and a steam temperature of 110f. The traditional guidelines for using the Hamam is first - sweating and relaxing for 10 - 15 minutes in steam, pouring water with a bowl, scrubbing the dead skin particles with a Kese, soaping the body with olive soap, rinsing and finally relaxing with a massage or in the relaxation area.”

Refreshed from the road, it was now time for dinner. We had tickets for a revival of Cole Porter’s *Anything Goes*, directed by Trevor Nunn, so we searched out a restaurant in the theater district. We settled on a small Italian restaurant in the theater district. Small, authentic (despite being in London) and directly across the street from our theater, it was all one could ask for.

This small Italian eatery began what was to be a grand culinary adventure, the sort only great cosmopolitan cities like London can offer. We had Indian. We ate in a British pub (fish and chips!). We went to coffee bars and pizzerias. We ate in the chocolate section of Harrod’s. We would have tried more, but we were limited to five days and two stomachs.

After dinner came the show. *Anything Goes*, my months of research told me, was one of the most popular shows currently playing, and it was difficult enough to get tickets. Reviews – which were of course included in the packet I presented to Helen before we left the States – called it exuberant and colorful, which meant it fit in well with the overall itinerary. Even if the reviews had been poor, this show, too, was a no-brainer. Written by Cole Porter, *Anything Goes* is sprinkled, peppered and doused with his best songs, including many of Helen’s favorites.

After a night in our outrageously sumptuous hotel, we rose early for museums. The four-million piece Victoria and Albert museum, a showcase for Victorian-era luxury and fashion, was first on this list. We marveled at gowns worth a small country and intricate curios with which the rich and well-born entertained themselves in the capital of the world’s largest empire.

The next day, we saw the British Museum, its 2.5 miles of corridors packed with treasures carted back from that far-flung empire, not the least of which was the Rosetta Stone. In the center is the great reading room in which many a famous scholar toiled and the *Communist Manifesto* was written. Many museums boast one or two great pieces of art or history, but what is so remarkable about the British Museum and the few other of its like is its size. One could spend a lifetime in it, and despite that the displays are packed and there are no filler items. Though not every piece is the Elgin Marbles – “relocated” from the Parthenon in the early 1800s by one Lord Elgin – they are all treasures.

That night we went to Trevor Nunn’s short-run *Hamlet*, something he had not produced since his amateur years despite being the director of the Royal Shakespeare

Company. Staged at the historic Old Vic, where Richard Burton and Lawrence Olivier had graced the stage in the same show, it put to shame any other production of Shakespeare we'd seen.

The first days of any trip seem long and full. You can do a hundred things only to check your watch and find it is still not lunchtime. As the days pass, they pass more quickly and events and places begin to blend. So, too, with this trip to London, but each day was as capital as the last.

We wandered London great public parks like Hyde Park, once an aristocratic hunting ground. We peeped through iron gates into private ones. We wandered Trafalgar Square. We saw Big Ben and Tower of London. We passed visited the Prime Minister's residence and Westminster Abbey, where all but two monarchs since William the Conqueror (1066) have been crowned. We visited a ruined left by the Romans. We explored the new Tate Modern, with its exquisite collection of modern art set off by the industrial setting (it is housed in a converted factory.)

When the five days ended, it was hard to return to the austerity of Siberia and my simple apartment. I had grown to like luxury. London had provided the pomp asked of it.

For those who were wondering: she said yes.

Sidebar:

Britain Visitor Centre. 8846 9000. Visitbritain.com. 1 Regent St. SW1.

Lodgings:

British Hotel Reservation Centre. 0800 282888. Bhrconline.com

The Bentley. 7244 5555. www.thebentley-hotel.com. *Harrington Gardens, SW7 4JX.* 200 pounds+.

London City YMCA. 7628 8832. www.londoncityy.org. 8 Errol St. EC1. 33 pounds +

Fielding Hotel. 7836 8305. www.The-fielding-hotel.co.uk. 4 Broad Court, Bow St. WC2. 76 pounds+

Attractions:

Victoria & Albert Museum. www.vam.ac.uk. Cromwell Rd SW7. Free. 10am-5:50pm Mon, Tues & Thur-Sun. 10am-10pm Wed & last Fri of every month.

The British Museum. www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk. Great Russell St. WC1. Free. 10am-5:30pm Sat-Wed, 10am-8:30pm Thur & Fri.

Westminster Abbey. www.westminster-abbey.org. Dean's Yard SW1. 6-8 pounds. 9:45am-4:45pm Mon, 9:30am-4:45 Tues & Thur-Sat, 9:30am-4:45pm & 6pm – 7pm Wed.

Tower of London. www.hrp.org.uk. Tower Hill EC3. 7.50-11:30 pounds. 9am-6pm Mon-Sat & 10am – 5pm Sun (Mar-Oct), 9am-4pm Tues-Sat & 10am-4pm Sun & Mon (Nov-Feb).

Transportation:

Black London taxi cab. Londonblackcabs.co.uk.

London Underground (“Tube”). Thetube.com.

Photograph captions:

IMG_1794. The Tower of London. Less luxurious than the Bentley.

IMG_1666. Underdressed for the occasion.

IMG_1768. The grand, industrial Tate Modern.

IMG_1777. Southwark Cathedral.

IMG_1687. A hidden garden in Kensington.

IMG_1810. The British Museum, treasure of an empire.