

Towering Cranes and Waist-High Posts
(England and Scotland, 1992)

After years of putting away money into our savings, and with careful planning, in 1992, we felt our children – 16, 14, and 12 – were old enough to appreciate a family trip to explore the history and culture of Western Europe and Israel. We would discover through the course of this two-week trip that our children's desire for cultural fulfillment was not what we had hoped.

We flew across the Atlantic from Seattle to London's Heathrow Airport.

As we were walking to Customs, we recognized Jim Slem, Principal of Roosevelt Middle School, at the departure gate. We waved to each other. What are the chances that at the exact time we would be at this place, in summer, half-way around the world in London?

The next day, we took a tour of London on the red double-decker buses. As we were getting off the tour bus, there we saw our Rabbi Yitz and his wife boarding that bus. Another amazing coincidence!

During our four days in London, we visited the Tower of London where kings and queens imprisoned their political enemies – and usually cut off their heads. We would hear the Big Ben chime the hour, and we spent a few hours in the terribly hot British Museum. We roamed the busiest section of London: Piccadilly Circus and Trafalgar Square with theatres, restaurants, department stores, and lots of people and car traffic.

We took the train one day from London to the quaint town of Bath, very nice shops and very clean. There, we watched a game of cricket, which we didn't understand.

After visiting London, we took a train through the beautiful countryside to Edinburgh. We arrived at our hotel, the Kariba Guest House. It was a small hotel

with two rooms. The steep stairs to the top floor questioned my acrobatic abilities with the large suitcases we lugged across the ocean with us. The rooms were nice enough. The kids were surprised when they discovered that one of the sinks folded down into a converted shower. Such ingenuity! Why didn't they have this in the U.S.!

We went into the city center for dinner that first night. We were excited to see the city life. When leaving the hotel, my survival skills automatically employed. I had made a mental note to myself of the large blue crane that sat adjacent to our hotel. As we were traveling in 1992 - the Stone Age Era - without smartphones, GPS, or other wayfaring tools at our disposal, I assumed my observation of this enormous blue crane would be sufficient for us to use in order to find our hotel when we returned that evening.

Returning by foot from the city, I thought I saw the same blue crane in the distance, and suggested that we take a shortcut in that direction.

Peg didn't agree. She insisted that my directional judgement was astray, and demanded that we return the exact same way we had arrived. Instead of spending more energy on the argument of who was correct, we decided to test each of our theories, with Peg, Shanna and Shmuel returning the same way we had arrived, and Joshua and I venturing towards that tall blue crane.

Joshua and I definitely did not win that contest! We arrived to the hotel, exhausted, after walking for over three hours in circles, including through a shoddy neighborhood, chasing that blue crane. Little had we considered that there could be more than one blue crane adorning the landscape of the Edinburgh skyline.

The Edinburgh Scots we met were very nice people. Our children were confused by their vernacular expression, sounding similar to the English they spoke in America, but with a twist that made it undecipherable. "What did you say? Please, can you repeat that – *in ENGLISH?!?*" I did like their rolling "Rs."

When on this European portion of our trip, we wanted the kids to have as many enriching cultural experiences as possible. For us, this meant taking them on city bus tours and to museums. For our teenage boys, it meant trying to secretly buy decks of cards with naked women. Many parents can relate to the frustration of trying to explain the deep historical and artistic significance of a Leonardo da Vinci painting to your children. Our children responded with demands to leave, as they had already “seen” the entire museum, racing through it in less than 45 minutes, and declaring they were “bored.” I, at least, got to visit the Writers’ Museum in Edinburgh, marveling at the collections of original writings of Robert Burns, Robert Frost, Walter Scott, and Robert Louis Stevenson.

Joshua, Shmuel and I got tickets for the night “Ghosts and Ghoulies Tour.” Peg didn’t think that Shoshanna was old enough for this tour, and even though she was begging me to take her with us, she stayed back with her mother. A doughty, middle-aged woman, with rolling-eyed expressions, and wearing a green cloak and hood, led the tour. She was terrible.

We had been sold a tour that was supposed to reveal the secrets of terror that roamed the streets of Edinburgh for hundreds of years. Instead, what we received was an unappealing display of over-done acting, with fading ghostly effects, and corny attempts to frighten us. The tour included a large contingent of French tourists. This forced the tour guide to give a spiritless translation of everything she was saying.

She stopped in a courtyard that bordered the street to tell us that in this spot people testified to seeing heads, legs, and arms floating in the air. Whereupon, Josh began to loudly sing, “I Ain’t Got No Body,” much to the amusement of the French girls standing near him.

We all thought the guide was terrible. The boys wanted to leave. I wanted to complete the tour – more upset about the thought of how much we had paid for the

tickets, insisting on enduring the excursion, with the hope that we could learn a little more in the final part.

“We paid for this tour, and we should finish it!”

The boys were upset with my decision, but trudged along. I tried pointing out unique architectural aspect of the building in front of us. My hope was to encourage them to appreciate this amazing experience.

Unfortunately, I failed to notice the innovative security measures employed by the Scots – low metal posts strategically placed to prevent vehicles from parking on the sidewalk. *Wham!* My crotch decided to engage battle with one of these waste-high posts, losing in agonizing pain! Crumpled over in throbbing discomfort, my boys doubled over in laughter.

I looked at the circumstances with a new clarity: “It’s time to go.”