

Traveldiary Brigitte & Heinz
**Great Britain: a varied country with
a varied culture,
thereto a bit Benelux & France**



**Chapter 24, Part 1 of
In Great Britain as Tourists,
hereafter in Benelux & France as Na-Tourists**

March & April 2013

Great Britain: a varied country with a varied culture

March 1st 2013, we boarded [Brittany Ferries'](#) large vessel Armorique bound for the [U.K.](#) Though the car ferry is operated by a French company, already the booking process was very British. Titles like Mme and Mr. are really only good enough for commoners and therefore, the internet-tool proposed also more honourable titles like Lord, Lady, Sir or Reverend. As we couldn't choose "naked King and Queen", we opted to those titles German speaking natives are meant to bear. Ironically, we discovered that only the English website proposes titles of nobility or honorific forms of address, whereas the German version offers just simple Herr+Frau (Mr.+Mrs.).

Around sunset, our ferry docked in **Plymouth**. Cautiously, we cautiously adapted to driving on the wrong side of the road – for us the first time we did so with a vehicle that is designed to drive on the right side of the road. We also had to get used to convert the indicated distances and speed limits from miles to the metric system.

For the night we had booked a B&B room in the seaside resort of [Looe](#) which we reached within an hour. The village is glued to the slopes on both sides of an inlet that is used as a harbour. In summer, it must be quite touristy but right now it was just perfect; not too busy but with a good choice of restaurants. We opted to eat Chinese and had another good look around the village before we started our tour around the United Kingdom on the next morning.

Cornwall: driving between hedges to astonishing coastal views

After a few miles, we reached [Polperro](#). Here we were greeted with the first of a million "pay and display" signs. To us, the four pounds parking fee were quite a shocker for such a small village. In the coming weeks we got used to it (reluctantly) and weren't even surprised if it cost more than that, be it in cities or out on remote view points... we just grinned and paid it. Coin management got a big matter as you always have to pay the exact amount. If one hour costs 4 pound and 3 hours six pound, you still get only one hour if you pay £ 5.95! Just a pity if you don't have the extra 5p coin. At least we must accredit that parking lots are clearly signposted and often provide clean toilets for free.

Polperro itself was a nice little harbour village, though probably a bit overrated. Even beginning of March, tourists seemed to outnumber locals. As [Cornwall](#) is reputed for its mild climate, it attracts visitors year round. The roads are mostly narrow and it can be a major challenge, passing other cars or equestrians on horseback. Thanks to the Brits courteous gentlemen like drive code, venturing on those small roads is still quite bearable.

The peninsula of Corn-wall must pies and its walled roads. Yes, road-stretches are walled with so-matter whether the width of the most of the roads are flanked by metres tall, right on the edge of the without leaves and newly trimmed, narrower during summer. The hidden behind such walls and after local resident entering the main road Cornish hedges. Well, once you've your parking fee and displayed the will be rewarded with awesome



have lent its name from Cornish hereabout not towns, but entire called Cornish hedges! It doesn't carriageway is two metres or six, walls of hedges that can be up to six road. Mind you: we have seen them which means the roads become still region's beauty is to big parts every bend you have to expect a through a tiny hole in the wall of managed to reach the seashore, paid ticket behind the windscreen, you views all along the coast.

In the evening we found a nice B&B in [Penzance](#), from where we stayed two nights and explored the surroundings. One excursion brought us to the nearby village called [Mousehole](#). It's nicely situated around a harbour but driving through strained our nerves. Here too, the roads are very narrow and because residents don't have off street parking but park on the road, passing is only possible if your fellow drivers are in their British gentlemen mood and let you pass. Squeezing through is a matter of "give and take" possibilities and felt rather like sneaking through a key-hole – in fact, Mousehole is just one of countless "keyhole-, respectively mousehole villages" in the country.

Once we finally managed to get to the edge of the nearby cliffs, we were stunned by dramatic seascapes. The view points at [Lizard Point](#) and a little west of it: **Kynance Cove**, were just amazing. Both had craggy cliffs with crumbling rocks forming sea stacks and other astonishing shapes. Though the wind blew strong and cold, we were glad it remained dry. We wrapped warmly and hiked a bit in every direction on every view point.

Land's End, Britain's westernmost point, was equally pretty with several rock arches. Unfortunately, a huge tourist complex is trying to divert the masses of tourists from the natural beauty. If people flock in just because it's the westernmost point, it's too easy to separate fools and money, so why shouldn't they do it? Only the parking fee is imposed, otherwise you choose freely, whether to go directly to the coast or straight into the tourist traps. The highly praised resort town of [St. Ives](#) was, in our opinion, again overrated. The fact that it's extremely touristy does not add any beauty to it. Penzance, where we stayed, charmed us much more.

Cornwall's north coast: at its best in sunshine

As we headed on and continued our tour of Cornwall, we were finally accompanied by plain sunshine. Therefore we stopped quite often. First, in the village of [Hayle](#), where we admired a beautiful inlet with many water birds. Only a few miles eastwards, we found beautiful dunes and billabongs in the nature reserve **St. Gothian Sands**. Not smooth, but rather dramatic, were the cliffs at "hell's mouth" near Camborne.

Soon thereafter, we marvelled at the high fragile looking rock arches at the beach off **Perranporth**. The higher the track led us above the beach, the more impressive arches came into sight. It was low tide and this made the vast golden sand beach very wide. By the time we were hungry, we reached the stone village of **Tintagel**. It's a bit touristy but it has some unique grey stone buildings that give the place a special character. As always, apart from natural sights, we are also interested in discovering local specialities. Here we indulged again in Cream Tea, a delightful creation Cornwall "exported" to the whole Kingdom – including Down Under. Freshly baked scones are split in half and generously topped with clotted cream and jam. Traditionally it's accompanied by tea but nowadays, coffee got also popular. Another local invention are Cornish Pasties; meat and/or vegetable, embedded in a shortcrust pastry. We were also impressed about the array of tasty local cheeses the U.K. has on offer, it's not all just about Cheddar!

Well fed, we continued our trip eastward and stopped again at **Crackington Haven**. It has a fascinating tidal seascape that can be walked at low tide. It consists of black visibly folded sedimentary rock formations of grey shales and Carboniferous sandstones. Partly it looks like cooled lava and in other sections it appears like a 10m tall black dough that had first stood upright but melted sideways upon heating. Many rock pools had formed between the layers, teeming with sea grass, live mussels and sea snails.



Overnight we found a B&B that was more like a Backpacker's Hostel on a "lifestyle-farm". It was situated near [Bude](#), Cornwall's border town to the neighbouring province Devon. Following the recommendation of our Landlord, we took the risk and ventured to a pub for dinner. We didn't regret it, as it was more like a "gastro pub" than a noisy, sports TV polluted watering hole. Surely, it had all the deep fried pub grub on offer, but there were also healthy and well prepared alternatives on offer. On other evenings, we often took advantage of the fact that you find in most U.K. villages, even small ones, at least one Asian restaurant. The most common are Indian, but also Chinese and Thai are easy to find and sometimes a Japanese, Malay or whatever, will also offer good and healthy food.

Exploring coastal Devon and Somerset: steep hills and touristy railways

Our first stop on the next day, meanwhile our fifth in this country, was in [Ilfracombe](#). This is a large seaside town in Devon. The town's theatre, named Landmark Theatre, is with its two tall and one small cone, really a landmark. Locally it's nicknamed "Madonna's bra", but you have to be very prudish, if this concrete structure inspires your fantasy that much...

The town is naturally grown and has many neat large houses, sloping up the hillside above Ilfracombe's picturesque natural harbour. A big hill that falls down to the sea as a steep cliff, protects the harbour and part of the town from the ocean's moods.

Continuing east, we could admire plenty more striking cliff and rock formations all the way to Combe Martin. From there road A39 led up and down steep grassy hills until we met the coast again at [Lynton](#). After parking there, we took the foot path down



to the tiny settlement of **Lynmouth** some 210m (or 700feet) below. Down there, tourist businesses outnumber locals, not to mention the number of visitors. So we did what tourists are meant to do and took the funicular cliff railway back up, to avoid getting too hot on this sunny day with about 4°C.

We passed through parts of Exmoor-Nationalpark on our way to Porlock Hill. A steep road with a gradient of up to 25% leads from 400m (1,300ft) down to the village on sea level. Those with heavy vehicles or campervans have to take a toll road that leads smoother down to Porlock. As our cheap brand Dacia, at 100'000km still has its original brake shoes, we took the steep road. Gradients of 25% or even more are not uncommon all over the U.K. and normally they can't be bypassed.

Never the less, it didn't take long until we reached the village parking lot in **Porlock** that greeted us with an abundance of "pay+display" signs. Just feeding the parking metre is not enough. You have to be submissive to a number of rules, as listed on the "menu of fines". Most car parks list around 15 price tagged offences, like e.g. parking beyond bay markings, parking when the car park is closed, repairing or cleaning your car, cooking on the parking lot, parking in an area not designated for your class of vehicle, or parking in a parking place for a purpose other than the designated purpose of the parking place!!! Sure enough, you could also be fined for making excess noise, as this would disturb those who risk getting fined for sleeping on the parking lot!

It's also clearly indicated how much discount you gain in case you pay your fine within a few days.

After studying the menu and making sure, everything is to the best of our knowledge and belief in order, we wandered around the neat village of Porlock with its many houses, covered with thatched roofs.

Overnight, we stopped at **Dunster**, some 8 miles down the road. Here, we found only a room in a pub, and it was not as nice as the B&B's we've stayed beforehand. However, the food we got in one of the local hotels, was out of the ordinary. When asking the waitress whether the chef comes from the region, she answered "no, he's French!" Dunster village was somehow unassuming but pretty. There was an unusual covered market, a round dove tower, some thatched roof buildings and a large castle.

After a few days of uninterrupted sunshine, rain and fog were back but it didn't matter so much, as we were now heading for the city. Along the way to Wales, we strolled around **Bridgwater** in Somerset, an appealing lively place.

Cardiff: the pretty capital of Wales

It was March 6th 2013 when we reached **Cardiff**, the imposing capital of **Wales**. We found the perfect place to stay; a backpacker's hostel next to the city centre with free off street parking. We loved to explore everything on foot, from the stately buildings in the old town, to the modern structures down in Cardiff Bay, about a mile to the south. The centre was very lively and packed with nice coffee houses. Proper coffee is much more readily available here in Cardiff than in the rest of Britain and we really liked it.



Most roads in the centre belong to the huge pedestrian area and are flanked with nice stately buildings of different epochs. We took our time and spent three days in this beautiful city which has a surprising number of Shopping Centres; some modern malls and some old fashioned arcades where the small alleyways between the shops have elaborate glass roofs. Sure enough, one was named "Queens Arcade" and another one "Castle Arcade" and there was also a "Duke-" and a "High Street" of course. Cardiff has an old fashioned market hall with small stalls where people still know each other, even though it's a city of 350'000. It was in the Central Market, where we picked up a good and typical example of truly sarcastic British humour. Two elderly ladies, both past their eighties and walking with canes, were laughingly greeted by a stall-keeper: "oh my God, you're still alive, the pair of you?"

In general, we experienced the very model of an Englishman (or woman) as good humoured, considerate and helpful. Friday evening, however, seems to change them for the weekend when many get unpredictable. Boozing and pub crawling seems to be a national obsession, especially but not only among the young. To prevent those folks from harming themselves too much, entire city centres are sealed off for traffic and police presence is highly increased. Surveillance cameras are omnipresent, even in small villages. To us, changing the society's attitude towards drunkenness would be more successful in eliminating alcohol related problems than constant surveillance. To fuddle shouldn't be something one wants to brag with, but something to be ashamed of.

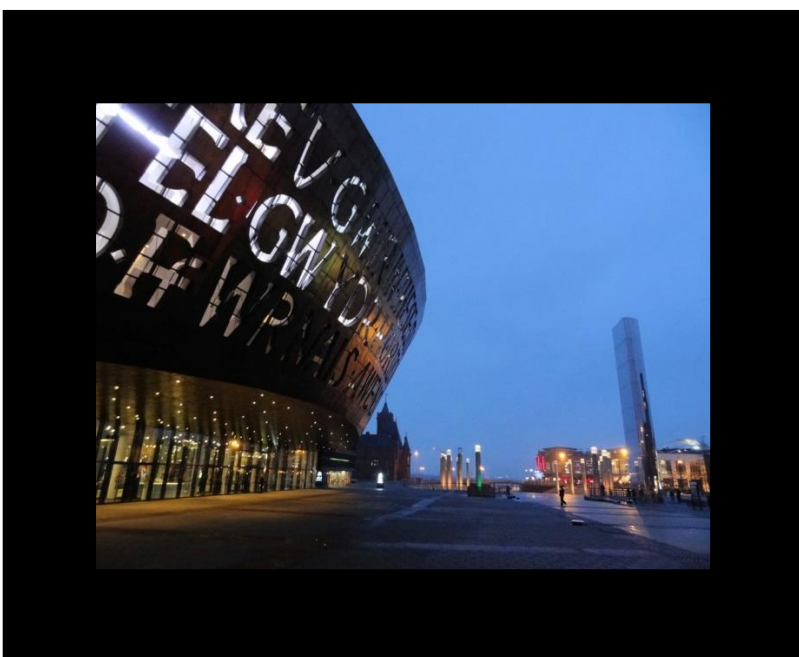
As we walked the streets after dinner on a chilly 2°C Friday night, we found ourselves wondering, just as other tourists, how lightly the ladettes had dressed. Those dolly birds looked almost like tarts to us. Sexy hunting gear seems to be a direct consequence of prudish societies. The lack of proper sex education, together with an excess of alcohol, result in more than 30% of British teeny girls getting pregnant. It's not too bad if you compare this figure with the much more

conservative USA, where 52% of under 19 year olds get pregnant. However, countries like Sweden, the Netherlands or Switzerland look much better with around 6% and even hot blooded Italians and Spaniards have less than 8% teenage mothers! Young people of all nations like to go out and party, so where's the cause for the problem?

Cardiff Bay: refreshingly modern

Brits love to live in row houses and also Cardiff has large quarters packed with such houses on both sides of the street. They all look very similar and most are very pretty with their little gardens. While walking down to Cardiff Bay, we passed many roads lined with such row houses. Nearby was a large Moslem quarter, where a totally different atmosphere prevailed. It was Friday and men in traditional dress were just returning from prayer in the mosque. The shops in this quarter were mainly serving the needs of the Muslim community like butchers or kebab stalls offering halal meat or barbers for men.

Not much further, we stepped into another world again: [Cardiff Bay](#), the former docks. Starting after 1830, coal had been loaded here in big quantities, but the trade ceased during WWI. Thereafter, we read, the docks became no more than tidal swampland and very smelly with sewage. The neighbourhood had quite a bad reputation as red-light district and multi-



ethnic meltpot. After lengthy planning and building phases, by 1999, the area was finally redeveloped. Now there is a tidal barrage that retains the water of two rivers in a huge freshwater lake. In the following, the reclaimed land along the new shore became an architect's playground who have sofar designed and realized about a dozen ultra-modern buildings. One of them is the new Assembly Hall of the Welsh parliament that was constructed after Wales got some limited self-ruling from the U.K. However, the Welsh don't seem to be too serious about independence, otherwise their modern new parliament building wouldn't have been designed by an English Lord and officially opened by Queen Elizabeth II.

Other remarkable buildings in Cardiff Bay are the [Millenium Centre](#) with its theatres that only got completed in 2009.

Furthermore, there is the Mermaid Quay, a

waterfront complex with restaurants and shops. Not many old buildings survived the re-development but two were lovingly restored: a wooden Norwegian church and the "Pierhead Building", which had been the lavish company headquarter during coal shipping times.

British food habits: rather fast than healthy

It was a rainy day when we left Cardiff for North-western Wales. Inland, we drove through pastoral landscape, dominated by steep green hills. As soon as we hit the coast, it was sunny. The coastal inlet and the sand dunes near Tywyn looked very beautiful in glittering sunlight.

In the evening, we reached our holiday cottage in **Y Felinheli**. From there we enjoyed great views over Menai Strait. The former farm building had been converted and renovated to a bright modern holiday flat with big windows. On two storeys, it offered great vistas and all the luxuries we like.



When we arrived, it was shortly before 7 P.M. on Saturday night. So we quickly unloaded our gear and then rushed to the supermarket in Caernarfon to buy some groceries. When we asked at what time the shop closes, Heinz heard something

like 12 but asked again, since he didn't believe what he'd heard. The saleswoman almost apologized and explained: "sorry, this is a small village and therefore we close at midnight. However, bigger towns like Bangor (13'000 inhabitants), six miles from here, have supermarkets open 24 hours. Only on Sundays, they close for a few hours".

When browsing around the hypermarket, we soon discovered that pre-cooked meals work out cheaper hereabout than cooking something fresh. The range of microwavable food is just unbelievable and the price too: the cheapest "meals" go for as little as one Pound Sterling! For those who like something lazy but prefer the illusion of having a proper meal, there are restaurant-style "menu-deals for two" available in abundance. For £10 the lazy would-like-to-be chef can assemble a "gourmet meal" out of pre-cooked dishes. They only have to choose from several starters, main courses and desserts, put them in the microwave and while it's reheating, start sipping the wine that is part of the meal-deal. How long will it take until people forget altogether how to cook, because of laziness, lack of time or funds to buy fresh products? Instead of spending money for a raw, untreated and unseasoned piece of fish, meat or vegetable, they will spend much bigger amounts on miracle slimming cures or at the doctors to get rid of the consequences of all that fast-food.

It would be easy to find healthy alternatives in the U.K., also when eating out. The problem is just that the culture and low prices let too many people stick to junk-food. Six to eight pounds for TWO pub-meals are a common asking price. Fish & chips and hamburger stalls have become so much of an integrated part of British cuisine that ordering chips as side dish is common place even in ethnic restaurants. Chinese and Indian food is hereabout often munched down with chips instead of rice. We noted with surprise, how guests in an Italian Restaurant commonly ordered chips with their pizza and pasta – have they ever heard about how much carbohydrate we need? It didn't stop there! Even Michelin-starred restaurants put, needless to their well-balanced meals that usually include a wide variety of healthy side-dishes, chips as additional side order on the menu. Why should restaurateurs be health conscious, if it's so easy to earn some additional bucks with simple potatoes?

North-Wales: a week amidst of stunning nature

Sure enough, we did not only spy out British life to point out the cultural differences, we had mainly come to explore the great countryside and our holiday cottage in Y Felinheli was a good base to do so. We didn't need to go far to visit the famous ranges of [Snowdonia National Park](#). Though Snowdon, the highest peak, is only 3,560 ft/1'085 m tall, the landscape looks truly alpine. As much as its name suggests a snowy mountain, most years it presents itself only as a barren brown peak. Just like on continental Europe, this winter lasted longer and brought colder temperatures than usually. Therefore, several of Snowdonia's peaks were covered with a touch of snow. In Snowdonia there are 93 summits higher than 2,000 feet of which 15 are over 3,000 - or in metric words: 5 peaks reach more than 1'000m and 88 higher than 600m above sea level.

As nights got freezing cold, salt was generously scattered on the roads every evening. That way, British die hard outdoor enthusiasts could safely reach the frozen plots of grass on the mountains, where they pitched their tents. We didn't expect the locals to be so eager to hike and less so to camp whatever the temperatures.

The [Island of Anglesey](#) could also easily be reached from our holiday cottage, as it was just over the bridge on the other shore of the narrow Menai Strait. With more distance from the mountains, the panorama over Snowdonia's peaks could

best be admired from over there.

Anglesey offered a variety of very interesting sights as well. Also the weather was anything but boring, somehow it was "April in March". When we arrived at Black Point, our first sight seeing stop, it was glooming in golden sunlight and surrounded by mystical dark clouds. Only minutes later, we fled back to the car, as a heavy snow flurry hit the coast.

Luckily, the white stuff settled for a few minutes only and half an hour later we explored the ruins of Beaumaris castle in sunshine again.

On another day, we visited Anglesey Island's northwest, near Holyhead, where the ferries to Ireland leave. We, for our part, drove out to **South Stack**, an area of fascinating coast line and a bird sanctuary. Large colonies of Guillemots were already populating the sea cliffs. Again, it was mainly sunny, but we had to brave a stiff cold wind and occasional short showers.



Welsh language: a real tongue twister

For us, who speak reasonably well English, it was just great that we could communicate with everybody during our five weeks in the UK. However, Wales has its own language which we most often heard here in the north west, where Welsh is the mother tongue of about 20% of the population. It is of Celtic origin and related to Breton and Cornish. Hereabout, traffic signs are bilingual and for tourists on the move difficult to read quickly, especially as every local council decides, which language to put first. In the south, despite the capital Cardiff being there, we recognized the Welsh language only on government information boards and traffic signs, but never heard it spoken.

Cultural differences may exist, but in general, Wales appeared to us as British as the rest of the U.K. All over the Kingdom, the “dos and don’ts” are clearly and politely marked on large boards: please pay... please mind the step... no noise please... We had to smile, when we saw a sign in front of a freeway tunnel, kindly asking not to pass the tunnel with a horse drawn carriage or by walking. When we had to pay an entrance fee, one staff even said “sorry, I have to charge £ 5. The Brits are a truly polite bunch.



On the coast, we visited [Llandudno](#) a Victorian seaside resort that was developed already 1850. Most of the noble town houses and mansions along the parade date from those times.

Only a few kilometres to the west, we admired the walled old town of [Conwy](#) and the still impressive ruins of the former castle. After dawn it is illuminated and reflects majestically in the water of the natural harbour at its feet, presuming it isn't low tide.

Even nearer our holiday cottage was [Caernarfon](#), another walled town with ruins of a bold castle, though of different architecture. The curtain walls, as well as all the round and polygonal towers are still intact and the castle is nowadays listed as world heritage site. Inside, it's obviously just a ruin but the old town it guards, is very pretty and lively. The castle was strategically placed on the confluence of the Seiont River and the Menai Strait and constructed between 1283 and 1330.

England: discovering the sparsely populated western region

After 11 days in Wales, we continued to discover the western part of [England](#) on March 16th 2013. We devoted a good part of the afternoon to the extraordinarily pretty old town of [Chester](#). We admired the many half timbered houses and other stately buildings of mediaeval and Victorian times. The beams of the half timbered houses were not all straight but often rounded and had ornamental carvings. Many of the windows had crown glass and there was an unbelievable variety of elaborate bay windows, bow fronts, balconies, as well as turrets and dormers. On that Saturday afternoon, Chester was extremely lively with shoppers and tourists and we loved to soak in the atmosphere.



Next on our agenda, was [Shrewsbury](#), in the West Midlands. With some Good Luck we managed to drive straight into the suburb that supposedly has many B&B's. However, while checking how close the city centre is, we got lost in the maze of one-way roads and so it took us a solid hour and 40 kilometres until we knocked somewhere on the door.

Also Shrewsbury has a nice city centre and by the time we could explore it, big snowflakes fell down from the sky. So we quickly sought shelter in a Thai restaurant where we celebrated Brigitte's birthday.

On the next morning, the sun was with us again and we went on to visit some small villages. First on the map was [Much Wenlock](#)

where we saw some half timbered houses and the ruins of an old priory (from the outside only, as we didn't pay the £4 entry fee). From there, we drove along snow capped hill ridges to [Ludlow](#). Contrary to the previous village, Ludlow was quite touristy, maybe because it's bigger and boasts many souvenir shops and eateries. The town itself is pretty indeed, not only because of the many half timbered houses and the castle ruin, but also because of its market.

The Cotswolds: varied and charming countryside villages

The same evening we arrived in [Stow-on-the-Wold](#), a small village in the touristy [Cotswolds](#) region. As we intended to stay for a few days, we took our time and patiently searched for the right room. Just a pity that the Landlady of the B&B we finally chose, went walkabout by the time we stood at her doorstep again. As it got quite late until we gave up trying to contact her on different means, we had to take a hotel room for the first night. At least she gave us a giant room the next day when we changed to her place.

Staying in Bed & Breakfast accommodations is a valuable experience of travelling through Britain, as you get in touch with locals and get an impression of how they live. Breakfast is in general huge but for us Swiss, who are used to hearty crusty bread and jam, instead of cooked morning meals, it involved some compromising. Bacon, eggs and mushrooms can be quite nice for a change but to get fond of English sausages, baked beans and Marmite, you probably have to be brought up with to like it.



What we missed most, was heavy crusty brown bread. Once Brigitte got so desperate for it, she went to a nearby Tesco supermarket who stocks some continental style bread.

On the other hand, we were surprised about the excellent quality of British dairy products. We spoil ourselves with rich creamy yoghurt, cheese and of course our new discovery: (Cornish) clotted cream – all fattening but great in taste!

Clotted Cream is produced by indirectly heating cream, either with steam or in a water bath, until it condenses to a fat content of about 60%. It is easy to get in Stow-on-the-Wold. At least 20 coffee houses and tea rooms serve clotted cream together with delicious scones in their “cream tea” or “afternoon tea”-deals. Furthermore, the village of 2'500 inhabitants also has some 20 souvenir shops and at least as many restaurants. Sure enough, some might cook simpler than others, but in this village it is certainly easier to find a high quality upmarket eatery than cheap pub grub.

Now in off season, Stow-on-the-Wold prove a perfect base for exploring the surroundings. After getting some input from tourist brochures and our guide book, we ventured out to the Cotswolds villages and discovered that we liked some of the “not so famous” best. It seems strange: the more souvenir shops could be found, the more tourists were abound. Some villages were already raided by the specie “homo sapiens turisticus” mid March and we wouldn't want to come back here in summer.

Presently, visitors consisted almost exclusively of Brits and we got the impression that they, by culture, are much more fond of little knick-knacks as found in souvenir shops than our society. On internet portals, like TripAdvisor, it was striking how most Brits liked over-commercialised sights with countless souvenir shops, even in the middle of nowhere, whereas German speaking nationals found this rather annoying. Other countries, other manners.

We found it striking how different the Cotswolds villages were in appearance and construction.

[Broadway](#) is unique for its uniform golden yellow sandstone buildings. [Chipping Campden](#) pleased us with its many thatched roofs. [Bourton-on-the-Water](#) has countless bridges, [Moreton-in-Marsh](#) has a wide boulevard but too much traffic. Then we loved little [Painswick](#), that has a unique church yard with 100 funnily trimmed trees. Much bigger was [Cirencester](#), a town with two distinctive churches and several old limestone buildings, next to newer pastel coloured ones.



Outside the Cotswolds: vibrant historic towns

We also drove out to visit some attractive towns outside the Cotswolds. [Stratford-upon-Avon](#) is a charming town on the Avon river. The town still makes a big fuss about its famous son William Shakespeare. Sights are plentiful and include inclined half timbered houses, a modern theatre on the then overflowed river shore, a pretty clock tower and several old churches.

Also very appealing was [Oxford](#), the famous university city. The town is packed with pretty historic buildings and we wandered for hours along those stately colleges with their churches. Loads of cheap restaurants were aiming at the student crowd, whereas the main pedestrian area was bustling with overpriced eateries aiming at tourists. The very city centre is only open to public transport, which means predominantly red double decker buses and old fashioned black, or sometimes coloured ([London](#)) taxis. During summer there are many punt boats on Oxford's water bodies, but presently they moored by the dozens on the two rivers; the Thames and the Cherwell.

And we visited also [Cheltenham](#), a former spa town, with lots of buildings typical for such a resort.

After five days in Stow-on-the-Wold, we continued our tour and drove again to Wales. While cruising around the U.K., we observed that towns, cities and parks along our way were often named after places we know from overseas, like Marlborough, Perth, Newcastle, York, Picton, Stratford, Blenheim... If there would be less traffic and carcasses of kangaroos on the roadside, we would feel like being in Australia. Here however, there is lots of traffic even in rural areas and we mostly saw pheasants that were hit by cars. The colourful and curious male birds can be seen often - dead or alive.

Back in Wales: a week in a modern cottage with typical British equipment



In the evening of March 22nd 2013 we arrived at our next holiday cottage. It was situated in **Penally**, near Tenby on [Wales'](#) south-western Pembrokeshire coast. Our cottage offered all the luxuries, like dishwasher, washing machine with dryer and baking oven. But as often in the U.K., some little things that go without saying in big parts of the world, were missing: a sizeable dining table and mixer taps.

While looking for holiday cottages around the U.K., we had soon realized that it's easier to find one with several TV's, rather than with a proper dining table. It seems common practice that the English munch their (microwaved junk?) food down while watching junk on the box. We ignored our two tellies and attempted to perform the miracle of placing all our breakfast jams on the bonsai table.

This was usually after the screams from the bathroom had faded because we didn't manage to handle the silly gas appliances without a mixer tap. In the shower, the two old fashioned taps were at least connected to one hose, though this one regularly got hooked in the six-armed wheels of the bib valves, thus tearing the patiently adjusted temperature into another extreme, be it hot or cold. Even less advanced was the sink where the hot and cold water came out of two taps miles apart though only a fingerbreadth from the basins rim. The last time we had seen such antique fittings regularly, was Down Under...

Splendid Pembrokeshire Coast: managed by a charity

The [Pembrokeshire Coast National Park](#) was the reason for our coming here and it was right at our doorstep. Its vast coastline can get discovered on 186miles (300km) of coastal path. The scenic rugged cliffs are and full of fissures, coves and arches and uncountable rock stacks poke out of the sea. Geologically interesting are the rock layers that vary quite a bit in colour and fold shapes. Everywhere we went, be it on a remote headland or in front of one of the many fishing- or tourist resort villages, the scenery along the coast was just amazing. Our favourite sites of those we visited, were **St. Nons Bay** below **St. Davids**, then the outcrop **Wooltack Point** near **Marloes**, **St. Annes Head** and the giant rock arch called **Green Bridge at Stack Rocks Point**. To get access to this so called green bridge, we had to wait until the military cleared the way through its territory for tourists.



We often came across military territory in the UK. To us, it seems that a lot of the funds that go to the army, are lacking in maintenance of civil infrastructure. Roads with potholes, rusty bridge pillars or collapsed retaining walls and stairs are common sight. If it gets too dangerous, the common cheap solution is just to fence it off and close those sections to the public.

Many duties and services, which in other countries, belong to the responsibilities of the government, are in the hands of charities all over the U.K.. There are countless national monuments like castles, national parks and nature reserves managed by a charity called "National Trust". To raise enough money to be self supporting, they rely on donations, membership fees, legacies, entrance fees and an army of 61'000 volunteers. Along the Pembrokeshire coast, the National Trust managed big sections of the national park and had parking lots with kiosks, where a volunteer provided information, brochures and sure enough: collected parking fees. If the hut was unattended, there was always a box where visitors were invited to leave a "recommended donation" of a specified amount.

Because it is common courtesy to do something for charities, Brits have an extensive variety of them. First of all, church related charities cup the most hands. Next in the list are animal rescue, health, human rights etc.- go through it yourself, if you've got the time - there are 160'000 registered charities... "charitychoice.co.uk/charities".

Knowing that people in the U.K. are rather prudish, it's quite amazing how it became fashioned to pose near-nude for charity calendars.



On our last day in Penally, we walked to the small town of [Tenby](#), well worth a visit. It sits on a big rocky outcrop, high above a natural harbour on one side and a vast sandy beach on the other. Tenby is guarded by the ruin of a once large castle that adds some more character to the place. It was Good Friday when we visited and therefore bustling with people, despite chilly temperatures. However, the sun was enjoyed by everybody, whether they strolled about the high town-houses painted in pastel colours or down below, on the sandy beach that became very wide at low tide. As the difference between high- and low water is very big, the building of the sea rescue RSLI is placed on high stilts and has a steep ramp down to the water. This "pile dwelling" houses the vessel of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, a charity that saves lives at sea. Actually, there were two such buildings; the former station was sold and converted to a luxury residence.

Across England: impressive villages and national parks

On March 30th 2013, we definitely left Wales by traversing it through [Brecon Beacons National Park](#). Due to unseasonable snow falls last week, all of the higher hills were now white. We had passed here three weeks ago, and then everything had been green.

Not far after the "border" to [England](#), we came into Herefordshire, famed for its "black and white villages" with old half timbered houses in said colours. We strolled around the very pretty houses in [Weobley](#), small [Dilwyn](#) and picturesque [Pembridge](#), where we found a coffee house. The well travelled lady here made everything fresh and we have been lucky to find such places once a while.

Bypassing Ludlow, we landed in [Bridgnorth](#) for the night. This was an unexpectedly pretty little town, again with many elaborate half timbered houses and a covered market in the middle of the cake. We got a room in one of those leaning character houses where furniture has to be placed on wedges to stand even.

It was weekend and therefore many of the otherwise very polite and sensible English got drunk - not only the young. Somebody moaned that due to the financial crisis, many pubs had to close, as many "would like to get drunks" now fill up at home or buy booze at the supermarket and hang around the square. In our opinion, there were still more than enough of those places Brits fondly nickname "watering holes".



Didn't we just see an alarming sign at the fire brigade stating: "75% of all house fire fatalities are alcohol related" ? Maybe a Scandinavian-style tax on alcohol would smoothen the alcohol related problems and also provide money to the Queen's treasurer, helping him to fight the financial crisis!

Well, while in other nations, people drink regularly alcohol to savour, it seems that Brits want to get drunk. Therefore, they tend to drink the whole weekly statistic at once during the weekend! We just can't understand, why it's illegal to deal and consume drugs like hash or dope, but legal to consume and deal with drugs like alcohol and tobacco.

We had breakfast at the branch of "Costa Café" and thereafter, another good look around Bridgnorth, before leaving. Thereby, we saw the [Cliff Railway](#), which looked like an old bus mounted on a steep funicular. For us, the 100m down (thereof 34m in altitude) to the shore of the Severn River seemed like a good exercise before sitting in the car. However, the railway's 64% gradient might be an experience too.

Englands Midlands: snow and ice in all its variations

As we proceeded north east, we crossed the glittering **Blithfield Reservoir** on a dam. It was freezing cold and some snow laid on the roadside, but this didn't hinder Mr. Whippy's Ice Cream van to try for some business on the lakeshore. This being the last day of March, Heinz thought it was about time. Unfortunately he had to queue quite a while in the cold, as the van proved unexpectedly popular. Meanwhile, Brigitte was impatiently waiting in hat and gloves in the distance, not wanting to know this guy...

North from Cornwall and Devon, the roads were still lined with hedges once a while, but at least they kept now a certain distance from the road, making them a bit more bearable. However, with the snow flurries and the strong wind of last week, the road between those hedges got completely clogged with all the white stuff blown in. Despite it had snowed only a few centimetres, snow ploughs had to work day and night. Driving through this landscape now, was somehow bizarre; the fields were green again, but the road was lined with sometimes more than two metre high snow walls pressed to the hedges though immediately behind them, it was green.

Following a recommendation of the Tourist office in [Ashbourne](#), we detoured to **Dovedale**, dubbed as Switzerland of the U.K.. To get there was rather challenging, as the track was now lined with snow walls. No passing bays had been cleared and the road was barely wide enough for one car. Just a pity that the tourist office had sent other people there too and they all seemed to come from the opposite direction... By the way: the houses were really pretty, though they look nothing like Swiss chalets.



The next stop on our way, was at the spa town [Buxton](#). It is an airy place with lots of space and lots of stately hotel- and spa complexes. The opera building houses an indoor tropical garden, called Orangery, where an indoor flea market was held.

Leaving this place, we were already in the [Peak District National Park](#). Contrary to what this name might suggest, there are no high peaks in this park, only ~600 m high hills. But it was here, where they had the first and only avalanche in England last week. Even though it almost had melted away, we still could see, from which hill the avalanche had come down. It was not much more than a snow slab, though it had managed to push a car from the road.

We started looking for accommodation in [Castleton](#), a touristy village in the midst of the park. Well, on Easter Sunday, it was not the best of ideas to arrive without reservation. We still got by and found a room in an Inn. It was their last one and with good Luck we got it at a reduced last-minute price, even if that wasn't cheap. In the morning, we opted for continental breakfast and got really delicious croissants, mind we were in this remote "mountain village".

Well fed, we looped through Peak District National Park to Glossop, which brought us over a snow covered high plateau reminding of Norway's Hardanger Vidda. We got rewarded with great vistas all the way, and we believe we probably saw Manchester in the distance. Unfortunately, the road was narrow but fast, with no option to stop. Turning another 20 miles east, the road led us down to flat land and into urbanised territory. There was quite dense traffic but thanks to Easter Holidays, we easily made our way towards York.

By now, we had gotten used to British invented traffic solutions, coping with lots of traffic, limited funds and space. An often seen, cheap way of mastering busy intersections, are double-roundabouts. It only takes a few new signs, a bit of white paint to mark two dots in the middle of an intersection - and off we go. On the beginning, we were quite a bit afraid,

driving through these twin-mini roundabouts, but as we avoided the most densely populated areas, it was ok. On the road signage, it was unusual for us that the posted destinations were usually quite nearby. However, road numbering was consequently marked – much better than elsewhere, and thanks to this, it was easy to navigate.

York: snug lanes and old fashioned junk shops

On April 1st 2013 we arrived at [York](#)'s Ibis hotel, where we spent two days. With some Good Luck, we even snatched a space in their parking lot. In this Ibis, apart from traditional English items, the breakfast includes croissants and baguettes. The price for the room cost, at £ 57 about the same as a B&B in the countryside. In towns they charge often £ 80 or more. During our stage in the U.K., we mostly got by with £ 50 for our accommodation, and we never needed to pay more than £ 75, thanks to our travelling in off-season. Some luxury B&B's will easily charge £ 150 and more ...

The Ibis Hotel was close enough to walk to the city centre. Before we even got there, we passed Micklegate Bar, one of 6 remaining entrance gates in the largely intact city wall. York has been fortified by the Romans back in 71AD. The wall can be walked on 4,4km length and offers vast views, depending on where you are. The charming old town has many half timbered houses, some lining large boulevards, others narrow alleys. Somehow, York seems like the quintessence of England with such an abundance of old fashioned junk- and curiosity shops, they become trendy again. We observed that English households are decorated with lots of knick-knacks, creating a homey if not very modern atmosphere.

York's streets were bustling with locals and tourists alike, and this not only on the week-end. It's a very attractive city indeed. The two towers of the [Minster](#) dominate the skyline though parts of the immense gothic cathedral were currently under renovation. An impressive sight is the round Clifford Tower that stands as last remains of the castle on a small socket-hill. We also loved the waterfront along Ouse River where red-and-white sight-seeing boats cruised.



Museums are plentiful and in the pretty Yorkshire Museums garden crocuses were out already. We visited the highly interesting [railway museum](#); they say, it's the largest in the world. Sure enough, it's not government funded, but run by a charity. Housed in the old York Station hall plus an extra exhibition hall, old locomotives and rail carriages stand shiny renovated next to each other. To make technology accessible to lay people, some engines were neatly cut open. The exhibit included various foreign exhibits of more recent locomotives, like a Japanese bullet train, the Shinkansen. Sure enough, some lavish carriages that once transported Kings and Queens had to be exhibited as well.

York-Hull: leaving the Kingdom

Already it was April 3rd 2013, our last day in the U.K.. We were booked on a car-ferry from Hull but since it only left in the evening, we had an entire day of sight-seeing ahead. Driving across pastoral hills towards the east coast, we reached **Bridlington**. It didn't hold us for long so we continued to **Hornsea**, a seaside resort with many holiday parks packed with mobile-homes. It seems every Brit would like to own such a mini-estate, as we had seen such holiday parks all over the country. The beach at Hornsea was not very inviting, firstly because there was still an icy wind and secondly, because the water was totally murky.

In a nearby Tesco supermarket, we took our last chance to buy some fattening souvenirs, like Cornish clotted cream, cookies and chocolate. As always, they had some "multi buy offers" (get 3 for the price of 2), so we got out of the shop with more sweeties than intended.

Our last sight-seeing stop was in [Beverley](#), an enchanting town just a few miles north of Hull. We loved this place with its tidy pedestrian area, a minster and another bold church. Enjoying French patisserie in a bakery was our last act, though we had initially searched for either Yorkshire pudding or a last cream tea, before boarding the ferry to the continent.

Final thought about our stay in the UK

During our five weeks in the UK, we experienced a very diverse country with astonishing land- and seascapes. Away from England's densely populated areas, we experienced Great Britain at its best. We didn't expect to find such a great variety of landscapes; from surprisingly steep hills to brown marshlands, sheer cliffs, seemingly alpine mountains and even arctic scenery similar to some of Scandinavia. As well very appealing to us, was the rich cultural heritage, the variety of historic towns and villages with mostly well restored hearts in totally different architectures.

We had been warned about endless traffic jams but as we stuck to Cornwall, Wales and the Midlands, avoided the densely populated areas and travelled during off-season, we had been lucky to bypass all the crowded roads.

Apart from the unseasonal cold, it was rather an advantage to travel in March. Touristy places were busy but not crowded, as locals know, it can also be beautiful in winter. It was far from being packed like in peak-season and therefore rather easy to spontaneously find a room for the night. Landlords, sales assistants and waiters always had time for a chat. We truly enjoyed to be able to communicate with everybody, as they all seemed to understand our English with Swiss-German accent.

We liked the unbelievably relaxed and humorous people. It's still true: most Brits behave like proper Gentlemen or Ladies respectively; they are very considerate and very helpful. But it's also true that getting drunk seems socially accepted, some things are crumbling and the country is polluted with sports TV and fast food joints.

On the other hand, high class cuisine can often be found too, and foreign immigrants from all over the world, but foremost Asians - from India to Japan, brought a wide array of healthy dishes to the island. All in all, our trip to the U.K. was much more rewarding than we had hoped for and we can very well imagine to come back.

The Netherlands: revisiting a beautiful spot

A big car ferry: [P&O's](#) "Pride of Hull", brought us to the [Netherlands](#) in style. As it was an overnight crossing, we opted for a two-bed cabin, which was quite luxurious, thanks to its own bathroom and porthole. Our cabin was situated on the 8th floor of the luxury liner that is owned by a Dubai based company. There were two restaurants, several bars, a cinema and gambling hall, as well as the compulsory duty free shop on board. Most people raided the buffet restaurant before the boat disembarked around sunset, but we felt more at ease in the civilized à la carte restaurant.

Early morning of April 4th 2013, we alighted in **Rotterdam** and shuddered as we saw snowflakes dancing. If we had hoped it would be warmer on the continent, it was just wishful thinking.

Dutch people told us (in English) that winter had been extremely cold and extremely dry and therefore, lighting BBQ's was currently forbidden for fear of forest fires. As we drove around, we saw that the landscape was totally different from the begin of April last year. Then, the flowers were already out after a much warmer winter whereas now, nature was still hibernating. We chose again small roads that led us first to [Kinderdijks](#) many beautiful old wind mills. Later we came to **Otterlo**, where we found ourselves a B&B for the night.

On the next day, we finally managed to find some tropical temperatures – if only in the saunas and indoor pool at [Flevo Natuur](#). We discovered this nice naturist village last year and had booked the same mobile-home again. Of course we would have appreciated it more if it would have been warm and sunny, but after 3 months of intense travelling through Brittany and the U.K. we needed a rest anyway. Thanks to Flevo Natuur's good facilities and our comfortable mobile-home with central heating, we enjoyed our stay again very much, even though it was rather cold most of the time. We only made some short excursions this time, whereby we discovered the modern city of **Almere**, which was built from the drawing board after the polder of Flevoland (reclaimed land) had been inaugurated. During the 45 years that passed since then, some 200'000 people settled there. On the "old land", we visited the appealing villages of **Putten** and **Nijkerk**.

Towards the end of our two weeks at Flevo Natuur, our friends Gisela & Klaus visited us for two days. We had a great time together, talking, walking and having a sauna bath. As special welcome, we served our successful version of homemade scones, accompanied by clotted cream we had brought along from the U.K..



Four days, four countries

On April 19th we set off again and started towards the French Atlantic coast, where we were due to arrive in 9 days time. It's about 1'000 km and many people would consider it an easy 10 hours' drive. However, there is lots to see in between, and as we travel under the motto "the journey is its own reward", we had a hard time figuring out which route to take. In the end it just happened that we visited four countries in our first four days, though we made it barely 400 km away from Flevo Natuur. concentrated on the Netherland's [Veluwe National Park](#), where we the pretty and totally non-touristic the small country roads are a big way to bypass the heavy traffic on through pretty landscapes worth to so, as there are almost no other cars –

On our first day, we south-eastern part, crossing admired mossy forests, For the evening, we stopped at town of **Deurne**. For tourists, asset. They are not only the best Dutch clearways, but often lead be admired, and it's easy to do only bicycles everywhere.

On the next morning we hoped However, over there it was many potholes, narrow roads Never the less, we stopped at a and the pilgrims abbey **Banneux**. For the night, we landed in the Ardennes mountain range, at **Coo**, a very touristy place with lots of adventure activities for people of all walks of life and age.



for similar small roads in **Belgium**. different. Lots of nervous drivers, and speed limits that suit maniacs. few nice little towns like **Peer**, **Visé**

Luxembourg: a small beauty with a striking appeal

Next day: two new countries at once. Well, for two days we zigzagged through [Luxembourg](#), which was a big surprise to us. With 2'586 km² it's much bigger and more rural than we expected. Apart from Luxembourg City, where 20% of the inhabitants live, there are many more sizeable towns and villages. To us, they appeared all much more well-kept and more colourful than those in nearby Belgium. On our first day, we explored the border region with Germany along the river Sûre, stopping at **Vianden** along our way. For the evening, we found a hotel in the pretty and also pretty touristy town of [Echternach](#). As roadwork obstructed road access to town, we initially crossed a footbridge to **German territory** to see, if we could get a room over there. Certainly, it is not only a cliché that Luxembourg is a wealthy country and therefore we didn't find anybody trying to make some additional money by renting out a few rooms in their private home. Instead, four- and five star accommodation is much more established than anything in the budget range.



After a good night's sleep, we followed the Moselle southwards for a while. Then we backtracked on the German side, before entering Luxembourg again. Now we explored the country's interior, passing gorges and hills, which had every now and then a castle standing atop. Particularly impressive was the castle high above Vianden, and the ruin of **La Rochelle**'s castle, but we also spent time in **Diekirch**, where we found an Italian ice cream parlour again, actually a branch of a German chain.

Along forests and glittering rivers, we moved north-west to **Wilz**, a nice village situated on several small hill tops. Ironically for us, we found parking in a new complex by the name "Kouswiss" but no hotel room. After a good look around, we continued to **Esch sur Sûre**. Though this village was much smaller, it really invited for an overnight stay, due

to its picturesque setting with a ruined castle above a knee of the river. Like the day before, room prices were rather high but at least there were several open hotels. After exploring the village, we sat down in a very good restaurant, which was surprisingly bustling for a Monday night. As almost everywhere in Luxembourg, the staff consisted mainly of foreigners and we learned that in fact, an astonishing 43% of the country's 525'000 inhabitants, are immigrants from all over the world. Foreign born residents and guest workers are predominantly from Portugal, Italy, Poland, Turkey and Arabic nations.

The languages of Luxembourg are a very interesting subject as well. French and German have been official languages for a long time. Luxemburgish, a mix between a Mosel-Frankish dialect and French, had been established as third official language only 1984, in an effort to retain the country's identity. According to new rules, immigrants have to learn all three languages. Of local residents, 77% indicate Luxemburgish their mother tongue. As it's still the case with Swiss German dialects, Luxemburgish was previously mainly a spoken language. The first book was only printed in 1829.

We have spent no more than two days in Luxembourg, but experienced a very varied and interesting country, quite different from what we'd expected. We met nice people and visited many picturesque villages and towns and marveled at the fair bit of nature in between.

France: cross-country to the Atlantic

On the next day, we left to **Belgium**, where we crossed the Haute-Sûre nature park before driving into **France**. Late afternoon, we arrived in **Nancy's** city centre at the Ibis Budget hotel, where we had reserved a room. We started touring the city's sight-seeing delights without delay, as they were waiting for us in the brightest sunlight. Most outstanding is certainly "Place Stanislas" the large city square framed by stately buildings (like city hall, opera etc.) and gilded wrought iron gates, dating from 1755.

The next morning, we continued to **Troyes**, another highlight but of totally different architecture. Again, we were lucky to find a good place to stay in the city centre. Troyes' old town impresses with its many half-timbered houses, some dating back to the 16th century. The part of town that had been destroyed during WWII, boasts now modern buildings. We enjoyed our stay at this picturesque town on the River Seine to the full.



In the afternoon of the next day, we continued through lovely pastoral landscape southwards. Finally, spring had arrived and it came with a bang; temperatures rose to well above 20°C. Spring flowers were blooming in every meadow and all trees were in blossom. Unexpectedly, we came through the historic and quite touristy village of **Vézelay**.

For a change we had decided to choose our next destinations from a culinary, rather than a touristy point of view. That's why we stopped in **Luzy**, where we had another gastronomic meal at Hotel du Morvan. We think Chef Jérôme Raymond deserves a gold medal.

Further west on our culinary journey, lies the Dordogne Valley, one of our long-time favourites. To reach it, we fought a hole day through pouring rain but we got rewarded, as we arrived at **La Roque Gageac** the same evening. Soon, we found a room in a hotel in this picturesque village on the shore of the Dordogne River. We were delighted to see that the long needed foot path between the narrow mainroad and the river is well under construction, so that traffic and pedestrians are no longer endangering each other. We stayed a second day, walking along the river, visiting some nearby villages and heading for another gourmet meal in the evening to a restaurant we know for many years.

Brigitte & Heinz



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