

A Double-Decker Bus Ride

Off in the distance the melancholy sound of a fog horn can be heard. Then, the sharp, quick whistle of a "bobby" directing traffic. As the breeze blows past my face in my seat far above the street, I feel transported in time and space. The irritating sound of a chain saw from high up a nearby tree, assails my ears, and I duck to avoid a tree branch whizzing by my seat. The smell of "Petrol," lingers in the air from the chain saw as the worker waves from his perch in the tree. But, it's worth all the obstacles to be sitting on the top deck of a double-decker bus touring London.

I am captivated by the accents of the locals, though they are difficult to understand for most of us Americans. For me with my hearing impairment, it's sometimes next to impossible to understand what the guides are saying. I catch phrases such as "round-about," "Tally ho", and "mind the gap." The accents range from very proper and precise, to Cockney, which is fast and thick. The accents remind me of Eliza Doolittle and Professor Higgins in the play, "My Fair Lady." My husband and I were privileged to attend the play at Drury Lane in London's famous theater district.

The stops on the tour I'm on are so short, one had to be fast getting on and off. The curves are sharp and the roundabouts sometimes hair raising. A roundabout is a circular intersection in the road with grass, flowers, or statues in the middle, that traffic circles around to change direction. The roundabouts reduce the number of stop signs and traffic lights. I hold on to the cold, smooth handrail and turn my head from side to side, not wanting to miss anything. But, that's impossible, as there are more sights than I can possibly keep up with.

As interesting as the sounds are, the sights are even more fascinating. There are stone streets, walls, and towers everywhere you look, discolored by the rain and weathered from dark grey to black. Frequent rain causes moss to grow on many of the old, high buildings and stains run vertically from ledges and window sills. Many of the buildings are government offices and colleges that have been standing for hundreds of years.

The most majestic buildings are the many cathedrals and churches. And, don't forget the Parliament buildings and Palaces. There is Buckingham Palace, where Queen Elizabeth stands on the balcony to speak to the people once or twice

a year. It's decorated with black iron fences and gates and statues of royalty in white stone topping the walls. When there is a wedding or a funeral, the whole royal family will stand on the balcony, high on the front so the crowds down below can see them.

Across Hyde Park from Buckingham Palace is Kennington Gardens where Princess Dianna lived, and her boys grew up. The gold-colored pillars at the entrances are a mark of royalty. There are round towers and dungeons at the Tower of London, where many famous people met their death, including several queens during the time of King Henry VIII. Many bridges, only a short distance apart, cross the Thames River. The most famous bridge in London is Tower Bridge, where people can stroll across the top to look in the shops built along an upper span of the bridge.

The busiest round-about is at Piccadilly Circus. Circus means "Circle" and is used as another name for a round-about. The Piccadilly area has many high-rise buildings, some of which are main shopping areas, especially for tourists.

Wherever a space exists between buildings, there will be a billboard. Some of the signs are familiar, such as Coca Cola and McDonald's, but most advertise current events, upcoming plays, and concerts. The theater is a big part of life in London, so there are many plays advertised like *Les Misérables*, *The Mousetrap*, and *The Secret Garden*, to name a few.

Buses in London are colorfully painted and are covered with ads. They come in many different colors, green, yellow, some even two or three colors, but the most popular color is solid red.

Many city bus tours travel quickly but allow you to get off and reboard at most stops. Others travel at a slower pace and have helpful tour guides. The most leisurely and educational is Harrods', green, streamlined, three-hour tour.

The tour in Oxford, where Oxford University is located, was the most fun because the architecture is majestic and quaint, and the tour guides are more humorous. However, the tour that caught my attention was the very first ride I took in London, while I was still suffering from jet lag. At the sound of the loud, fast-talking accent of the female guide, I felt as if I had been hit over the head because of overload and the difficulty understanding her British accents. My husband and I decided to stay awake on arrival, so we could get acclimated to the time change, but a fast-moving bus ride may not be the best first thing to try.

Despite all the challenges, a visit to England would not be complete without a ride on the top deck of a double-decker bus. Be prepared for a very unusual ride. If you hear "Mind the gap," that means, "Watch your step," "Tally-ho" means, "Let's go!" or "We're off," and "Tootle-oo," means, "Goodbye."