

My quest to become British through a 1996 Cool Britannia exhibition

Written by a German with pre-settled status

As someone who didn't grow up in the UK, I'm constantly looking for things that help me understand how the Brits tick.

When I heard the former editor of The Sun, Dominic Mohan, was opening a free exhibition about all the things that made Cool Britannia cool in the nineties, I knew that was my chance to become a little more British.

Maybe, once I understand what happened during Euro 96, which of the Spice Girls' dresses was the most iconic and learn all Oasis songs, Reform won't kick me out in a few years.

So, what have I learned?

Well, the biggest thing I learnt was you need to plan around 20 mins to find the exhibition which is hidden in the Barbican music library. If you've never been to the Barbican, you need around 10 min to try and find the entrance. Then another 10 minutes trying to work out which "second floor" is the right one. For some reason, there are several. And I was definitely on the wrong one. There it was; right in front of me: the library. But I couldn't get there. Off to a great start.

Once I actually found the exhibition, I was confronted with album covers, magazines, football scarves and so much merch. There were other people in the library, but I was the only one actually looking at it. In fairness, 10am on a Saturday is probably not the prime time for visitors.

It turned out, there was a huge gap in my pop culture knowledge. And it has a name: Blur. Oasis yes, Spice Girls, of course but Blur? Never even heard of them so you can imagine my confusion when prompted to vote on which is the bigger band: Blur or Oasis.

Yes, you are correct, I did choose the one that I had heard of.

The Brits were (are?) kind of obsessed with Germany. Yes, I understand 1996 was a tough year for football in England. But it's not our fault that Southgate missed his penalty. The Sun declaring a "football war with Germany" is a bit much, don't you think?

Or is this a sensitive topic that's going to make me unpopular with the Brits? In that case, I take it all back, I hate Germany and it's coming home.

After my amusement with seeing Germany all over the nation's newspapers, it got a little sad. In 1996, a pint was a shocking £1.74 and a loaf of bread 53p (Are you listening Gail's?). I wanted to start crying. But had to hold back, we are in a library after all.

There was some shocking gossip in the Daily Mail, a lot of band props and great costumes. I had a little jump scare when seeing the massive Union Jack on the Spice Girls' boots but quickly reminded myself that back then it probably meant something else.

But is it worth going?

The exhibition is quite small, with most items displayed on the walls or glass cases. There are a few interactive elements but you only need about 20 minutes to see it all (plus those extra 20 minutes to find it). It focuses heavily on music so any 90s music fans should get something out of it.

And if you're not into 90s music but you're feeling a bit too happy and fancy ruining your mood by comparing life in 2026 to life in 1996, this will be exactly what you need.

Also, if anyone could point me in the right direction to become a 90s It girl – here described as “Champagne on ice. Marlboro Lights in hand. Didn't get out of bed for less than £20,000” - that'd be fab.

Thank you.