



Stumbling back to Britain

The cockpit told me London's temperature was zero degrees Celsius! After leaving thirty-degree days on the Malaysian peninsula, it would seem like Antarctica. Trudging through Heathrow airport's drab grey corridors, at six a.m., while looking out on the frosty scene, didn't lift my spirits much either. It was supposed to be Spring but felt more like one of those dismal winter days from childhood past.



Outside, blowing steam clouds and rugged up against the biting wind, I hired a *Ford Mondeo* estate: the largest motor on the block, with a rear compartment the size of a small truck; just right for a family with a mountain of child-supporting luggage. One of the larger bags - a cheap, but cavernous affair - had burst its stretched zipper embarrassingly in *Changi's* departure lounge, the whole drama thrilling my three-year-old. Now, the plastic monster was held together with knotted strings; pajama arms and doll's heads poking out here and there. I recall with some horror, the mountain of (so-called) hand-baggage, loaded onto my daughter's pushchair, which I wheeled gingerly towards the plane door. The hostess looked aghast when she spotted me behind the oncoming juggernaut!



After struggling to cram all the bags into the rear compartment, and with dolls and pajamas now free to roam, I drove out of *Heathrow* for the first time in my life. New country, powerful car, unfamiliar motorway, certainly brought the brain cells up

to speed, but soon the soporific effects of an almost empty Sunday M4, had the opposite impact, nullifying the earlier adrenalin rush.

This semi-permanent move to the northern hemisphere was seen as the trial run for a more permanent shift, but it was not the first attempt. We had come a few years before, setting up camp first amongst my extended clan in Cornwall, then moving to a leafy suburb in North London. But our income was simply not enough, and after nine months we had to pack our bags and retreat to the land down under.

This time, three years later, we were primed for our second homecoming. On Mondeo cruise-control, we swept down the M4, turning off after about an hour, to head towards our destination: Cheltenham in the Cotswolds. We stopped for a breather and brunch at a slate-floored, stone-walled pub, which had existed on that site for around 500 years! There was a lush green lawn at the front and small white wooden bridges straddling a gurgling brook, where the children played. It was picturesque and represented the vision which had underpinned our return to the April springtime of Wordsworth's England.

Unfortunately for us, that chocolate-box image would last for about one more hour. The job-exchange my partner had secured was arranged with a woman who worked in Gloucestershire's psychiatric hospital. Her job location should have warned us! The lady had advertised her house as a *Country Cottage*, but



unless our eyes deceived us, the *country cottage* had morphed into a rather down-and-out terraced place in one of Cheltenham's less salubrious suburbs. The exchange lady inherited our bungalow in Adelaide, which sprawled across the usual quarter-acre block. Compared to the hovel we found, she had won herself a queen's palace. Life is not always what it seems.

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