

BRITAIN, BRITAIN, BRITAIN

REETTA HUMALAJOKI PONDERES THE GREAT BRITISH WELCOME

Two hundred days have passed since I moved to this blessed place. Two hundred days since I left my own, penguin-infested land. I decided to give up herding reindeer for a more civilised, advanced existence, in a place that truly matters. Finland once belonged to Russia, but as I have been duly informed, Britain once owned half the world. It's easy to see which place is more worthwhile. My semi-permanent change of scenery is, as such, proof that I accept this... right?

“Finland once belonged to Russia, but as I have been duly informed, Britain once owned half the world.”

All exaggerations and sarcastic undertones aside, I have on the whole, through a process of enchantment, disillusionment and ‘coming-to-terms with reality’, come to enjoy living here. I now appreciate both the perks and the problems with the food, ‘cultural institutions’ and, especially, the people.

But thanks to my excellent English and a deceptively American accent, I have stumbled on something which has ever since constantly come back to nag at me. That is the fact that the views I presented in the first paragraph, though rare, gaspshockhorror, actually exist.

Admittedly, I haven't had monarchists parading past my door waving Union Jacks and hailing my conversion to the British way of life (I as yet resist and still love weird things like salted licorice and sweating in a dark room). The unconscious slips one hears are far more worrying than such blatant shows of xenophobia.

I've endured listening to degrading references about all manner of “foreigners” Sometimes, these are followed by a sudden realisation and an apologetic “Oh no, not you, you speak such good English!” as if a language and the increasing use of phrases like “popping in” and accidental “mums”

instead of “moms” will make me sprout roots somewhere near Coventry and imbue me with a sudden understanding of who the hell William Hague is.

As I'm doing an English and History



degree, my language skills may make life a bit easier, but it doesn't make me any less Finnish. So the next time you allude to those incomprehensible “foreigners,” maybe you should stop to consider something.

Do you know how long that Pole/Chinese person/Borat-looking-fellow has been in this country? Can you imagine how difficult it may be for them to learn the language and even begin to comprehend the meaning of pubs, your electoral system, and the utterly illogical shapes and sizes of your precious currency? These things, despite the detailed explanations of her British friends, still have the capacity to bewilder an American-sounding Finn.

Maybe it isn't your responsibility to

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make those foreigners feel more at home in your country. After all, we moved to England to get to know your culture, not the other way around. But if you've just lived in one house for all your life and only been away from this Golden Island for a week clubbing in Ibiza, or a 4-day weed tour in Amsterdam, it might be to your own benefit to ask, just once, “So what's your home like?” and actually listen to the answer.

IN DEFENCE OF EUROPE

Europe doesn't really make history anymore, but the past is everywhere and finding it is the challenge. Next time you're in London, walk past Harrods, look on the other side of the road – the shops are raised, built on a pit full of plague victims.

Scramble up a Heidelberg hill in the dark with 10,000 other young people, like refugees in a news report, to party all night in a Nazi amphitheatre where Hitler used to orate. Go find a World War One shell in a field near Ypres.



Riga's massive indoor market is a place of infinite discovery and meat cleavers. Evening mass and the tomb of St Anthony in Padua confirm that secular Europe isn't actually as secular as the atheists would like to think.

Watch the passengers change as your train travels from central Paris out through the suburbs. Find the great train journeys on this continent before looking for them elsewhere: the night train from Vienna to Italy through the Alps, the Barcelona-Valencia line and its similar cliff-hugging twin between Exeter and Torquay, any journey on Germany's “kissing” ICE trains. Sometimes, even here, it can be a nightmare. London to Verona on a coach was hell, Mannheim-Paris not much better.

None of this is intrepid and adventurous in a Marco Polo, Bruce Chatwin or even Michael Palin style. But Europe, dull, safe, explored Europe, on dull, safe, explored European public transport, is actually not boring at all.

Zaki Moosa