

# LONDON CALLING...

More than a decade after her OE, Sharon Stephenson returns to London to find out what happens when memory and reality collide

*again*

**ELEVEN YEARS**, two months and five days. An encounter with a decommissioned passport showed how much time had elapsed since I'd last been to London.

The small matter of a mortgage, career and living the suburban Kiwi dream had kept me from returning to the cramped city that held such intense memories for me. So when the opportunity to return presented itself, I leapt on it as though it was the last train out of Charing Cross.

And what a welcome I received: Within days I'd lost two-thirds of my currency, been caught on the Tube with rioting football fans and was almost knocked down by a balaclava-wearing thief in a quiet Soho back street.

One week later, my eyebrows are still impersonating *Star Trek's* Mr Spock. But there's no denying this city's gravitational pull: London – and Londoners – have attitude like the Italians have pasta. It's a boisterous, chaotic city of contrasts: Grand churches and decorative mosques, depressing housing estates and cutting-edge apartments, funky bars and traditional old-men's pubs, traffic-snarled streets and breathtaking parks, and every shade of skin, culture and class imaginable.

Like many Kiwis, I first came to London on my OE – a two-year stint that somehow morphed into four. Yet I was never one of those ex-pats who 'suffered' London: I loved all the challenges and the frenetic pace, the fat slabs of history around every corner and the fact that major decisions and trends were made here. Those four years were such a special time that I still view my life 'before' and 'after' London. Revisiting the past, however, can be a dangerous exercise and I worry that some of the magic may have disappeared.

I catch up with a friend, a born and bred Londoner, at a chic Kensington cafe. Because my pounds started life

as New Zealand dollars, I drink the most expensive hot chocolate I'll ever consume. But it's not just the cost or the cold that gets under my skin: I'm a big-city girl at heart and it doesn't take long for London's intense energy to make me feel more alive than I have in a long time.

It's odd, though, being a tourist somewhere you once lived: I feel conspicuous constantly pulling out my Tube map and even sillier when I'm scolded for standing on the 'wrong' side of the escalator at King's Cross station. It's a bit like coming home to find that someone has rearranged all the furniture.

I decide the best way to confront the memories is to visit some of my previous haunts.

Back in those days, I was young, single and in search of adventure, so naturally I gravitated to pubs. Time seems to have erased some of the more raucous memories, but I can recall spending far too much time and disposable income dancing on the tables at my dingy Fulham local, The Atlas.

Not that I could have danced on the tables now even if I'd wanted: The fairy godmother of gastropubs has waved her magic wand and gone are the sticky carpets, tattooed wide boys and old men with an extensive vocabulary of swear words. Today, The Atlas is all about polished floor boards, model-like baristas and pomegranate salads.

Other old favourites I try to seek out – an East End curry house, the pub where I met my husband, a fabulous vintage clothing store – are either gone, or changed beyond recognition. The sprawling metropolis seems a different beast to the one I'd left behind, despite looking almost exactly the same.

Fortunately, some things do remain: I spend hours at Portobello Market, one of the world's most famous street markets, which had a bit part in the movie *Notting Hill*. →

It once swallowed whole Saturday afternoons and it is strangely reassuring to find that some of my favourite stalls still occupy the same spots. A trip to Camden Market, however, leaves me with a 'why did I bother' feeling. The cool vintage stock has been replaced with the sort of pile-'em-high-and-flog-'em-off-cheap stuff that can be found in markets from Hong Kong to Helsinki.

Along with what feels like everyone else in London, I cross the Thames to Borough Market, London's oldest food market which has been around since the Romans built the first London Bridge. My tastebuds lead me straight to Neal's Yard Dairy, where the same hunky staff member is serving up wheels of golden cheddar, oozing hunks of brie and sharp goat's cheese. I get my usual – an unctuous raclette melted over potatoes, a Swiss specialty – and then remember, to my eternal shame, that I used to be slightly in love with this guy.

Memory and reality also collide when I visit St Pancras station to see my husband off on the Eurostar. The last time I was here, a dodgy pie and a watery coffee were as good as it got, but they have been busy in my absence: not only has the grime been wiped off the 130-year-old roof, they have also transformed a dingy railway platform into what is now the world's longest, and possibly the sexiest, champagne bar.

Feeling slightly underdressed, we take a seat at the bar which runs 92m alongside the platform where trains glide past on their way to Paris and Brussels. Cleverly bypassing the Dom Pérignon Jeroboam 1995 at NZ\$17,000 we try not to stare at the group of chic French women carrying oversized Louis Vuitton handbags and ordering NZ\$300 bottles of champagne. Proof that while the economic skies may be collapsing for some, others have managed to recession-proof themselves.

I'm hardly in their league, but you can't come to London and not shop. We swing by Selfridges, the grand old dame of department stores that celebrated its 100th anniversary last year. A tipsy Australian flatmate and I were once kicked out of here for trying on ridiculously expensive leather jackets and not hanging them up properly. Maybe it's because I'm older, married and better dressed, or perhaps it's the absence of alcohol, but no one asks me to leave and I spend a pleasant few hours wandering slack-jawed through the food hall and fingering the luxury clothing, wondering what I'd buy if my surname was Hilton. Wandering down nearby Tottenham Court Road, I'm

drawn to the wonderful homeware shops – Habitat and Heal's – that barely made it onto my radar when I lived here. Will hubby notice if I spend our fortnightly mortgage payment on a pair of highly covetable candlesticks?

I start the second week of my trip becoming what I've always mocked – a tourist – when I take a spin on the London Eye. At NZ\$43, it's not the cheapest half-hour, but it's one of the most serene: As the high-tech bicycle wheel gently rotates 135m above the Thames, I swallow my vertigo and look out onto those oh-so-familiar landmarks – the Houses of Parliament, Buckingham Palace and the revamped South Bank – spread beneath me.

As cheesy as it sounds, there's something comforting about this aerial view of the city where I spent some of the happiest days of my life: The place I met my husband, my best friend and discovered the great love of my life – travel. Is it any wonder a large part of my soul lingers here?

At a reunion with former colleagues, they all want to know one thing – how do my new impressions of London compare to my previous experience? Certainly there are new attractions and about two million more people to contend with. The food has improved and you can even get a decent cup of coffee these days, but the transport network is still so overwhelmingly unreliable, I'm surprised no one has slapped a misery warning on it.

Possibly the greatest revelation is that the London locals are, on the whole, friendlier and more helpful than I can remember: I lose track of the number of times people apologise for bumping into me on the Tube, and when I ask for directions, I get

offers to walk me to my destination. While waiting for a friend one night at Embankment station, I see a drunken businessman fall over. Before I've blinked, three complete strangers are helping him to his feet.

Like most Kiwis, I find myself comparing it with home: I miss New Zealand's wide open spaces, living in a house that isn't joined to anyone else's and drinking water straight out of the tap. Yet my nostalgic visit tips the scales in London's favour and I realise that the English capital isn't done with me yet.

So as our plane noses out of Heathrow, we prepare to uproot our lives yet again. The next time I'm on English soil, I tell my husband, I'll be back to live. ■

*Sharon Stephenson travelled to London with the assistance of Air New Zealand ([www.airnz.co.nz](http://www.airnz.co.nz)) and Visit Britain ([www.visitbritain.co.nz](http://www.visitbritain.co.nz)). She has just moved back to the UK.*

POSSIBLY  
THE GREATEST  
REVELATION IS THAT  
THE LOCALS ARE,  
ON THE WHOLE,  
FRIENDLIER AND  
MORE HELPFUL THAN  
I CAN REMEMBER

Sharon on the  
London Eye.

