

# Americans in London

Chris Ladd

LONDON CORRESPONDENT

There are 120 of us here, Americans in London. We've traveled from different colleges across the U.S., with one token Canadian, to live for four months as ex-pats, and after three weeks, we're still pretty easy to spot. We're wearing Gore-Tex in a sea of Versace.

I live on the fifth floor of our dormitory in the posh borough of Chelsea. My roommate is thin and moody and Russian and from the Bronx, and we share a small room, kitchen space, and the common dream of single accommodations.

There was a time, when we first moved in, when I committed myself to friendly, even brotherly relations with him, but as the weeks stuttered along, our relationship passed, as so many roommates' have, into the realm of headphones and hellos.

London is a vast and polished metropolis. It is the former center of the western world, twice New York's size with just half its population, and full up with museums, theaters, nightclubs, restaurants, pubs, and a generous sprinkling of the homeless. It is the single largest metropolitan area in Europe, and my roommate spends the bulk of his time here video-conferencing with his girlfriend, who attends a tech school in the Midwest.

When I get home, I'll usually ask how his classes went, and he'll usually slide off one of the fist-sized earphones he keeps cemented to his head and raise the corner of one eye-

brow above the wire frames of his glasses.

"What?"

His web-cam is on the fritz. He's gotten used to speaking just below shout-level lately, a habit he sometimes carries over into everyday conversation, elongating vowels and

**The city is broken into sections, or zones, crisscrossed by the twelve colored lines of the tube. The 'tube' is what Londoners call a 'subway,' but the word doubles for 'where exactly we'll be flushing our money' over the next four months.**

enunciating consonants with his teeth open like a grade school speech therapist. In London, the habit actually helps him to fit in, but I'm growing very tired of it.

"How was your day?" I say again, being very careful to pronounce my "S"s and "Y"s crisply, ending 'day' with a short burst of the hard 'ee' sound.

"Oh, fine, fine," he says, and glances back and forth from me to the choppy image of his girlfriend on the tiny laptop in front of him.

"Great," I say, flash him a smile and a quick thumbs up.

And the headphones return.

Our building is a renovated art school, and it's a lot like the Barbie Dreamhouse my sister had when we were kids. Not because it's terribly lavish or exceptionally grand or because it has any relation to Malibu

Ken, but because it is small, and made mostly from plastic. There are attempts, and these are building-wide, to hide the obviously cramped nature of the place--bright pastels and post-modern furniture splashed about the common rooms--but even to Barbie the place would seem like a

mixture of modern art and a Japanese bus station.

This is why I'm not allowed overnight guests: there's very little place to put them. Anyone invited over must leave photo identification at the front desk, and then retrieve it on their way out the door before the stroke of midnight. My dorm, in this regard, is how I always imagined boarding school, the main difference being that we are allowed beer in our kitchens and bedrooms.

I share a bathroom with the Russian, and it's a little over two feet square, shoved into the corner of the room by the door. If I shave on the toilet, I can complete my morning ritual and move just once. One move. In the space of a linen closet, they've managed to somehow fit a shower, toilet, sink, rack, cabinet, and shelf. I can't help but miss the

WHERE THE HELL IS WAYNE, MAINE?



days when I didn't worry about stepping out from the shower curtain, groping for my towel and sticking my foot in the toilet.

The building has no dining hall and our program includes no meals. It's been three weeks, and you can tell who is traveling on a tight budget by the way their clothes hang loose on their frames. Goods and services in London are among the most expensive in the developed world, and just about everything here runs double what you'd expect to pay in the states. Sections of our program have gone on the "poverty miracle diet," losing up to two-and-a-half inches in just three-and-a-half weeks. My roommate already rations his diet with powdered soup, which he eats at his desk 'with' his girlfriend.

Most of us have accepted that we will leave this city broke. The rest have resolved to leave hungry.

The city is broken into sections, or zones, crisscrossed by the twelve colored lines of the tube. The 'tube' is what Londoners call a 'subway,' but the word doubles for 'where exactly we'll be flushing our money' over the next four months.

A single trip on the tube costs two pounds ten, or a little over four dollars. You can buy a weekly pass, good on all buses as well, for 17 pounds. Four months worth of weekly passes costs 272 pounds. Or, about 550 dollars. Or, 180 cups of Starbucks Coffee. Or 93 pints of beer. Or 100 chicken salad sandwich-

es, 4.5 trains to Paris (and back), 5 newspapers per day, or 3.2 times what I paid for my flight here from Boston.

The trains are clean and convenient, but don't give too much credit to the authorities; its commuters are solid middle class. The rich own cars and the poor either walk or take the bus.

I fork over the money because it's quicker, more convenient, and easier to comprehend than the amnesic spider's web of bus lines, which have no grounding in logic or reasonable estimation of travel time. I work in an office here with an Australian who's been here three years, and he tells me the only way to use London's bus system is with a compass and a map, changing lines whenever the needle points someplace you don't fancy going. I haven't got a compass, but I figure buying one would offset any savings from the bus.

There is no hope for foreigners here, in a city where locals carry 200-page street maps on their person.

We have made it three weeks, and we're learning the ropes. In three more months, we may get this place down, but there is also the chance, the overwhelming possibility, that this town might eat us Yankees alive. Three weeks. We'll see.

Check up on Chris at [http://www.skidmore.edu/~c\\_ladd](http://www.skidmore.edu/~c_ladd) for photos and updates on his trip.