

Bye, Bye Britain

Chris Ladd

LONDON CORRESPONDENT

By the time my head dropped onto my cheap polyester foam-fill mesh pillow for the last time, when I drew the faded comforter up over my shoulders and settled the small of my back into the spot on the mattress where the spring pops up through the bedding, it was already four o'clock in the morning. My room, my entire life in the U.K., was packed into two bags underneath the bed, and the alarm clock lay resting on the newly barren desk, set to explode in two hours time.

This was my last, brief night in London.

In the morning I would take my last tube journey, all the way from zone one to zone six, all the way to Heathrow Airport, and then all the way to Munich. Soon enough, I'd go all the way to Boston, and, then, all the way to my house, all the way to another time-zone, another continent. Another culture.

Here's what I packed for that 5,000-mile trek. Here's a brief list what I would bring with me:

- A plastic bag filled with two and five pence coins, the remnants of a pistachio jar I emptied my pockets into every night for five months. In the mornings, I picked the one and two pound, the 50, 20, and 10 p coins from the bunch for coffee and snacks and, slowly, the jar accumulated terrific masses of these two worthless denominations; great, copper two pence pieces as big as silver dollars and as valuable as a can of spit, and five pence coins half the size of a dime, easily the most inconvenient bits of change in existence, especially with London prices so high against the dollar. (It takes 75 two-pence coins to buy a cup of coffee, 20 five-pence pieces for a bus token.)

- One pair of pleated khaki pants and one ugly sweater, both brought

over some confusion over "what the English wear," and then relegated to the back of the closet for the duration.

- A shiny, silver webcam. After enduring two months of sappy one-sided conversations and turning up my music to my roommate's shouting at his computer, I fought fire with fire and had my mother bring me a geek-camera when she came to visit. If nothing else, I can thank him for this, the best gadget I've ever owned. If only I could've gotten him to leave the room more...

- Tickets. Train tickets from Edinburgh, Munich, Paris, Brighton, Manchester, Budapest, Amsterdam, bus tickets from Scotland, expired Travelcards for the tube, metro tickets from Paris and Budapest, plane stubs from the Canary Islands, Munich, Zurich, and Boston, torn stubs from half a dozen plays, club flyers and dinner bills, and receipts from a comedy club in Piccadilly. There were times when I felt bored this semester, lots of them, but I'm confident that, at least on paper, I could prove my time abroad was jam-packed. I'm packing all of these things for sentimental value, and because I think some of it might be tax deductible.

- Two or three spent phone-cards, all I bought while I was over here, and a reminder of how little I called the ones I love. I've never been a phone person, but as the weeks went by, I got worse and worse, calling less and writing fewer and fewer emails.

- Laptop, reading packets, and notes for a still un-written 3,000 word final paper, to be written on the plane and on the road. Another theme of the semester lay in a commitment to last minute bursts of scholastic frenzy,

writing papers in train stations, airports, planes, Paris, and Florence. I could do these assignments on schedule, of course I could. If I only wanted to. Couldn't I?

☞ Slowly, the jar accumulated terrific masses of these two worthless denominations; great, copper two pence pieces as big as silver dollars and as valuable as a can of spit ☞

- A yellow, flute shaped coffee mug with the word "ROMANIA" stamped on its base in blue block letters, the same mug I drank from two days a week for five months during my internship here. If they hadn't given it to me, on my last day, I probably would have stolen it.

- Long forgotten orientation materials, cast aside almost at first glance but which, on closer inspection, are actually helpful, well written and interesting. (I pitched them for the free binder they came in - stationary supplies are ridiculously expensive in Europe, probably because they haven't got any trees.)

- An Easter card from my mother, and a letter from my father, and one from my girlfriend, along with a stack of dog-eared books from the same.

- A stack of various postcards, written and unsent, from various locales, stuffed into a paperback copy of "Catch-22". Several from Scotland, one to my grandmother with a picture of a Scottish spaniel in a hand-knit sweater on the front, one to my

WHERE THE HELL IS WAYNE, MAINE?



aunt and uncle with a hairy cow in a telephone booth, one from Paris with topless Parisians for my father, and a stack of sequential ones from the Canary Islands for my girlfriend (actually a single letter written on 14 numbered postcards, to be sent in order, one per day, for two weeks. This was meant to be romantic and endearing, but instead the lot of them sat in one solid mass on my desk and waited for postage that, ultimately, never came.)

In the morning I would wake at six o'clock, quiet the alarm, and shower with my eyes open but still dreaming. I would pack my shampoo, my razor, my oil-free face wash, my bar of moisturizing soap and my

still damp towel, and throw the final zip on my carry-on luggage.

I would leave my key at the front desk for the very last time, and step into the early morning sun, down the steps in Chelsea one last time. I would hop onto the 49 bus to South Kensington station and stumble across the street with three heavy bags, unaided by caffeine or drugs of any kind. Stepping into the station, I would say goodbye to central London, and when I stepped out of the train, half an hour, and five zones later, I would already be gone. I would already be on my way home.