

A TRIP TO SOUTHWESTERN ENGLAND

By Tyler Miranda

You wake up when it's still dark outside. No way, you've done it again. While turning off the alarm clock, you can't help wondering why on earth you did stay up all night long watching three movies one after the other knowing that you would have a long interesting day ahead. But there's no time to question why you get so easily addicted to cinema. Get off the bed, today you're going to Stonehenge.

The coach is waiting at Victoria Station. Our guide looks professionally friendly, and can't stop making jokes I can't understand. He describes Stonehenge as a very impressive architectural work, and says cavemen would have found it way easier to have a pint rather than to build up such a massive monument. My fellow travellers laugh politely. I must look a bit "petrified", but maybe it's just because I did not sleep enough. Anyway, this is pure British humour, just to add a little bit of folklore to the trip. Right, the trip. I don't know much about it, I was just told that I would see Stonehenge, and that was a hell of enough for me. On the coach, I learn we're stopping at Windsor Castle first. That's great, I love castles. My hometown back in Italy is just a bunch of miles away from an astonishing castle, so I am naturally a bit sceptic about any other castle in the world. When your first trip ever takes place at your hometown castle when you are seven years old, it is unlikely you would ever find a better castle thousands of miles away from there.

WINDSOR AND ITS CASTLE – THE QUEEN'S HOME SWEET HOME

But the Windsor Castle is truly astonishing, as it is still inhabited by the Royal Family and is said to be the oldest inhabited castle in Europe. It stands on a hill in a very beautiful cosy little town, Windsor, of course, which looks very different from the unrestrainable Capital City. We're just a couple of hours drive from London, but it's enough to realize how different life must flow outside the Big City. People don't rush and keep smiling at you while you climb up the hill to make your way to the Castle.

Once inside the castle, I can't stop thinking about our ancestors. Hundreds of images gather into my brain: a little child prince, unutterably excited for his first baby armour, a little girl trying to stand still while the portraitist paints fake white make up on her face, a Saracen king offering his fabulous collection of scimitars to the King of England, scholars panicking when in 1992 part of the castle set on fire. Images that collapse when entering the St. George's Hall, a vast room whose ceiling is decorated with the coats of arms of past and present members of the Order of the Garter. And once outside the castle, you realize nature is the sovereign. Its amazing colours dominate for hundreds of miles and eyes get lost to tell them all.

STONEHENGE, FROM EARTH TO SKY – THE HEARTBIT FROM THE PAST

But it's already time to jump on the coach and leave behind these beautiful landscapes and fascinating stories about kings and queens. Stonehenge is just one hour drive ahead us. Many things have been said about this archaeological site, which is more than 5,000 years old and is considered one of the most beautiful UNESCO's Heritage Sites in the world. This burial prehistoric monument has inspired loads of stories and tales, mainly because of its evident link with the sun and the moon cycles and because it is a proof of the actual astronomic knowledge men had thousands of years before Newton and Galileo. Stonehenge is said to be one of the Earth's most important power spots and is felt to be the heart chakra of the Earth. That is why hundreds of men transported magical bluestones from as far as Wales, through the Avon river. They believed those mysterious stones which remained always warm could somehow open parallel doors to ancestral powers. And maybe they were right. You can't wait to be there to see with your eyes and feel the power of Mother Earth calling you through time.

But once there, you forget anything you have ever heard about Stonehenge and the fact that you are a 21st century human being. You forget about where you come from and where you live. You don't mind the other people surrounding you. There's just you and the stones. Huge, still, amazing. It seems they look at you and make fun of your frailty. Look at us, they say. We were here long

before you and we will be here forever and ever, after the child of the child of your child will be forgotten.

Then, the noise of the highway takes you back. Fortunately, they are planning to move the highway and the car park far from the site. Next time I'll come to visit you, it'll be just you and me. The man and the stones. Stonehenge, you don't fool me. You were made by human beings like me. Dozens of men probably had to get injured or die just to make you standing here now in front of me. And it was a bunch of cavemen who decided were you had to stand. From where the sun had to shine through you. And even if we still wonder why, they did it for an astronomic reason, or for a religious belief, or maybe for both. That's human frailty and supremacy on you indestructible stones.

OF PIGS AND ROMANS – WARM BATHS IN BATH

While you get lost into those intricate and contrasting thoughts, your coach is about to leave. Reluctant, you join the group wondering what Stonehenge would look like in the sunset or at night. We stop in a village, apparently in the middle of nowhere, to have our very prosaic rest and fill our stomachs with some traditional British ale. The trip has not finished yet, though. I happily discover we're going to Bath. The city is well known for its Roman baths and, again, my Italian background makes me totally sceptic about it. Where I grew up, Roman influence is everywhere. I find it difficult for Bath to surprise me. Another World's Heritage Site, Bath lies in the valley of the Avon river and around naturally-occurring hot springs. Here the Romans built their baths and probably a temple which was later replaced by an abbey church. According to the legend, the hot springs were first discovered by Bladud, mythical king of the Britons, who contracted leprosy in Athens, where he was sent to complete his education. Once come back, he fell into disgrace for his miserable disease and became a swineherd. The legend says he found out that some of his pigs who had contracted a skin disorder came back covered of warm mud and cured. The city decided to commemorate Bladud's legend this summer, with a bizarre exhibition of one hundred decorated pig sculptures distributed all over Bath. Indeed, any city can really surprise any sceptic mind. I leave the pigs behind to visit the beautiful abbey, built and rebuilt three times all over the centuries. But I am still looking forward to seeing what my Roman ancestors

were able to build in this barbaric land they conquered two thousand years ago.

I enter the baths, and soon feel the heat and humidity of the place. People that visit it are religiously silent and astonished. I can't help thinking that centuries ago this place was more likely the noisiest venue of the valley. I put my hand into the warm water and immediately feel an irrepressible temptation of having a bath in the warm pool inserted in the Roman building. You can still feel the lascivious and lazy attitude of ancestors gathered in this public venue. Nothing can surprise me, but this place certainly does not leave me cold in the English autumn. It is still summer, though, but nobody notices it, not even summer.

LONDON CALLING – BACK TO THE 21ST CENTURY

While still indulging in languid thoughts, I realize my time is about to be over. I have to go back. Back to the coach, to noisy London, to my 21st century life. On the coach I keep looking at the cars flowing towards their destinations. I ask myself all sorts of philosophic questions you are most likely to think about when you distance yourself for a while from your usual daily life. When you realize you are just a tiny miserable part of a greater world which existed way before you and to which your own existence will not make any difference. I can't find any answer, of course, and I can't say why I am here, but I know this sense of pride and thankfulness for being me *hic et nunc* (here and now, as the Romans would have said) will not vanish so soon.

For further information:

www.viator.com/tours/London/Windsor-Castle-Stonehenge-and-Bath-Day-Trip-from-London/d737-3858EE021/TR