

B33 ENGLAND'S BEAUTIFUL LAKE DISTRICT

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It's a rather long trek from the Cotswolds to England's beautiful Lake District so we chose the rather unromantic M5 and M6 motorways to help us cover the ground. We threaded past the manufacturing metropolis of Birmingham and headed directly into a cloudburst that caused a panic stop at one of the rest stops to erect the top.



"Might as well have a Starbucks while we're here" was the unanimous decision. It gave us a chance to e-mail our hosts, Jude and Chris Bratt, that we are on our way. Louise was rather trepidatious about our stay because I'd met Chris only once for lunch in London years ago. She knew neither and was concerned about compatibility with total strangers for several days. "We're waiting dinner on you," was their prompt response.

On the way we encountered an unexpected problem with the MG. The rainy and extremely windy day, coupled with the buffeting pressure of a very large tractor/trailer truck, caused the driver's door to suddenly pop open. Not a big deal on most cars but the MG's are hinged at the rear thus earning the name "suicide doors." With the side curtains acting as a large airfoil, the door flew wide open, popped the retaining stop and pinned itself to the rear fender. In the process it broke the steel window frame of the side curtain. Not much damage done to the door already damaged on the boat but it scared the hell out of both of us. I quickly found a way to attach the bungee cord to the side curtain with the top up. We limped on to Arnside.



Jude and Chris Bratt live in the small fishing and retirement village of Arnside in the Cumbria region of England. The area is called the Lake District for a good reason. I believe there are at least 12 lakes in a very small area. The surrounding mountains make for picture postcard photos...even those taken by amateurs. Here's a piece of trivia for Jeopardy fans. If asked, "How many lakes are there in the Lake District?" the answer is...one. Bassenthwaite Lake. All the others are named mere or water...the equivalent of lake as in Windermere. Ok, it's obscure I know but will make you stand out at nerdy parties.



What makes Arnside unusual is that the tides come and go with amazing rapidity. So rapid that a siren announces the next high tide and anyone caught on the flats had better step it up to avoid being overtaken and drowned. Another jeopardy is the presence of quicksand on those flats. Persons and animals fleeing the incoming tide have been caught and perished before they could be pulled from the sand.



The Bratt's are both recently retired and their two children long gone...Jude from a teaching career and Chris from his own television production company, not unlike ours. We met because his company produced television programs for British Petroleum. BP recently purchased ARCO, a

company for which we produced programs for over 22 years. We did lunch in London years ago and found an immediate affinity through our business and personal interests. I told him then about our dreams for this trip and he offered, without asking his wife, to shelter us for a few days. At the time he probably thought there'd never be a follow through. Well, here we are at the home they purchased and remodeled over the past six years.

They've done a beautiful job of reworking a 1930's somewhat dowdy house into a modern, comfortable home and with Jude's (short for Judith) talent for accessorizing, it has the feeling of being lived in for a long time.





A real point of pride is the vegetable and flower garden planted outside their back door. Want some arugula? No problem. Just step outside with some clippers and it's in the kitchen. Same with cut flowers and other niceties. Jude took a year-long course in establishing a proper English garden and they've carried it out beautifully.



That doesn't mean Chris is a slug. After pouring all his efforts into reworking the house he now has some time to sit in his office to answer e-mails and write nasty letters to local officials and even members of parliament. His favorite perch is an office with a huge picture window that overlooks the previously mentioned treacherous tide basin. I asked him, "How do you get anything done with that view in front of you?" His answer was typical Chris. "It's easy," he said. "I work at night."

They've thrown themselves into community activities as well. The day we arrived they were off to work for a group called the Royal National Lifeboat Institution or RNLI for short.



This volunteer group mans lifeboats to rescue people from small boats or from sinking ships. It also trains people to rescue hikers from cliffs that they've scaled but can't unscare. It reminded me a little of our volunteer fire departments in the States.

As with most volunteer groups they're underfunded and raise money with raffles, bake and book sales and that's where we were sipping tea. We joined the raffle but didn't win a thing.





While Jude and Louise were attending to the details of the next meal or reducing our giant pile of soiled clothes, Chris and I went out to do guy things. To stave off the potential boredom of retirement, Jude enrolled Chris in a class on Walling. No, that's not a typo.

In a land that is blessed with more field stone than soil, it has been a tradition to clear the stone, stack it up neatly and use it as a barrier. These walls last some 300 years but after that they often crumble or tumble and need repair.



To tidy things up, volunteer groups of men get together and rebuild the walls, usually in association with a charity or other good works. Chris finished his first walling class and continued to the next level. After several years he's now qualified to instruct others who come to walling for



reasons unknown...except most are of a certain age. Before doing any work they get together and throw insults as a warm up before picking up stones. I took these pictures of one such group and felt quite pleased when they began insulting me. It had no effect because I never laid a hand on a single stone...

unlike one of the men's dog who played with a wall stone like it was a rubber ball. Trouble with assistance from a walling dog is it's hard to break them from lifting their leg on the work.



Jude and Chris squired us around their adopted area as if they hadn't another thing in the world to do. We toured several of the lakes that attract families, fishermen and geese alike

and visited the garden center that features plantings and garden arrangements that show home gardeners what plants work in the area and how best to design their gardens. It's here that Jude



learned the botanical name for every plant in her garden.



They took us to the top of several local mountains so we could get the feel of the rolling terrain and enjoy a real highlands experience. This is Kirkstone Pass.



The top of one of those rolling hills is the Castlerigg Stone Circle. It's a bit like Stonehenge only a lot smaller as are the stones.

Anyone who takes the trouble to hike across a pasture will find a circle of large stones too neatly placed to be an accident but too casual to offer insights into a previous society.







It's thought this was a convenient area for different tribes to meet and swap foods, barter goods and whatever. It's a mystery still waiting to be solved. In the meanwhile, it's free and unfenced, unlike Stonehenge.



These trips wouldn't be British if we didn't honor tea time and after that a short walk to take the air and enjoy the view of one of their most picturesque lakes. This is Friar's Crag at Derwentwater.



You might wonder, "What's the MG doing while you're touring the region?" It developed some breathing problems caused by the increased humidity so a minor tuneup was in order. Chris found the perfect solution in AS Automobile Specialists, operated by John Atkinson and Dale Sharp in Kendal. They are car performance experts who love their work and are good enough to select what they work on. As it was they just happen to love MG's and were attracted to our California car in particular. It sat in their shop for several days and must have loved the attention because it now runs like a top. Thanks guys.



Like all good things, the end of our visit with the Bratt's had to come. As we sat around the kitchen table one more time, I reflected on our first evening with this unmatched couple.

They began with a light banter that slowly increased to a highly refined version of "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf." Louise and I looked at each other edgily wondering if we were about to witness a marriage meltdown. Then, when it got to critical mass, they jumped up and kissed each other and tore off on another subject of dislike, usually having to do with Rupert Murdoch. Jude called it irony and said this was the way their life had been since they were first married and suggested we try it. It turns out we'd been practicing irony during our marriage as well as have many of our still-married friends. The secret is to stop short of insults and, of course, to kiss it away. I'm not sure we'll ever get to the art form the Bratt's have made it.



What were we worried about before our visit? Compatibility? Even with a ten-year age difference we couldn't have chosen better partners with which to spend our time in the Lake District or anywhere else I might add. We have truly found new friends.

We were sorely sorry to leave the Bratt's welcoming home but a car rallye in the nearby town of Skipton was sending its siren call. We couldn't resist.

Louise and Ray back on the road in merry olde England.