



European Tour - London



Corky's Sunday in London!

May 4 , 1997



"Welcome to the UK, the most paranoid country in the EU".

So says the Immigration Officer, after we HAVE to step off our Big Pink Bus for the first time in a week, at Dover, the other side of a fine ferry ride, passports in hand, meekly announcing our arrival in JOLLY OLD ENGLAND. Whew... they let us through!

I have to admit, the weather forecast is still BAD... VERY BAD. A doomy, gloomy prediction, to be sure, for the day to come, tomorrow... A FREE CORKY! SUNDAY IN LONDON. Tonight, having MADE IT HERE, all I have to say is that it was ANOTHER GREAT DAY OF SUNSHINE AND SPRINGTIME IN ZURICH TODAY... and the forecast was for rain today. Sometimes, even the experts are wrong. My next words should prove interesting on this point.

OK. Now it's mid morning the day after, we're trundling along through more green and yellow patches headed for the ferry to Dublin and our next (last) stop, and I can tell you that it all went well, or about as well as it could have, considering the odds.

We rolled into London a bit after midnight, connected with Doug and Lucy, who'd been patiently waiting for hours, then headed off to a coach parking lot in Shepherd's Bush, near the BBC. We were all hungry. Pete said he knew where to find a bite to eat... just 5 minutes away... so we followed him. The first thing he led us into looked like a garbage dump, then, after we climbed out, we found ourselves on the streets of a fairly rough part of town... no big problem. Pete knew the turns, but the restaurant turned out to be closing when we arrived 15 minutes later. That was no problem either, as we were directed to another place, still open, down the street. That turned out to be an Indian restaurant with a cheerful waiter & good food, even a phone line to connect to if I'd had the right patch cord with me, so we all felt quite ok, if a little on the weary side... having encountered just one exploding beer can on the way back... when we hit our bunks sometime after 2am. Our last glimpse of the sky looked altogether encouraging for the morrow... a good half was clear, the rest white wispy clouds. OK.

I woke up first. Oh dear, it was already well after 8am. I walked to the back of the bus. Oh dear, the table was wet. I looked up to see the sun roof open and rain coming in. I looked out. Oh dear, there were puddles of water all around. It looked like it had been raining for hours. OH DEAR.

We headed into the middle of town, me more or less resigned to having to give London a pass, and stopped for a shower at (new crew members) Fred & Larissa's hotel room. I connected to the phone... it worked... while our grubby gang worked on their bodies. Then Niki's phone rang. It was for me. The Times had a photographer waiting for us at Hyde Park & was wondering where we were. It was already 10 am, and we were supposed to be there! Outside, the sky has suddenly lightened a bit and it had stopped raining, so we leapt into gear and headed for our venue... Speaker's Corner. By 10:30 or thereabouts the BPB was parked, quite legally, in the middle of Hyde Park & our crew was busy inflating our mum & kid orcas and stringing sections of the BANNER out. Doug Cartlidge, who had already worked a major miracle by getting permission for us, & even the BPB, to be there, worked some further magic and got us the ok to attach the BANNER to the park fences... because the grass was wet. There was a nasty breeze blowing, so we ended up hanging the BANNER on both sides of the fences, one side blocking the wind from the other. Pretty soon the whole scene was starting to look rather lovely, with long sections of CORKY'S GREAT BANNER stretching for a couple of hundred meters around the curving fence line near Speakers Corner, with the mum orca on her back on the grass nearby... having been blown there by the wind. GREAT... it was actually going to work again, though there was and never was any sign of the Times photographer. The sky had become considerably lighter, there was even a little patch of blue.

Something quite interesting happened as we were getting organized. We had no English language literature to hand out, and we couldn't put the information panels up because the wind was blowing too hard. Besides, all the writing on them is in German and we were in England. So, passersby had to come to their own conclusions about what we doing. At one point, as I was busy helping attach the BANNER to the fence, a group of people came up and asked what the BANNER was for. "I can see it's something about a whale named Corky" said one. "Yes, she's an orca who was captured a long time ago, but her mum is still alive in the ocean. We're trying to get Sea World to let her go home to her mum" said I. "Oh, that's great, I hope she makes it", said the young woman, and satisfied, she and her friends wandered off. A little later, as I was still busy with the BANNER, another, older lady with a dog in tow, came up to me. "What's all the fuss about one whale?" she said. "Do you want to let them all go?" I paused, sensing her doubt, and not really wanting to get into a big discussion right then.

"Well, Corky is one of very few captive orcas who's family we know. Orca families stay together their whole lives, and Corky's mum is still alive in the ocean. We just want to give them a chance to be together again." The lady smiled broadly. "Oh, I see, that's nice. Well, good luck to you then." And she wandered off, also satisfied. What was interesting about these exchanges was their brevity, and their completeness. There was no need to say more.

About the time we had enough of the GREAT BANNER TO FREE CORKY! up, for it to look impressive to eyes and cameras, black clouds came rushing up and it started to rain. I got really worried, watching words written in French with felt pens starting to blur, and I wanted to cut our losses and quickly pick everything up. Calmer heads than mine prevailed, and we decided to let the BANNER stay... then the black clouds rushed away. Soon there was blue sky peaking through, and the GREAT BANNER was dry again. Whew.

Well, of course, this being Speakers Corner, I had to say something. I think I've always wanted to speak at Speakers Corner, one of the true bastions of the notion of free speech, even if it remains as a bit of an oddity in today's London tourist scene. So we took a big piece of BANNER with a great FREE CORKY! message on it into the middle of the scene and tied it to the top to the fence in a spot where there was a gap between throngs. Niki & Lucy held the bottom to prevent it from flying away in the wind while I climbed up onto a soap box (actually it was a plastic bottle crate) and surveyed my audience. It's quite interesting, being just a little bit higher than the crowd. You can see. To my right, one impassioned speaker was outfitted in a Union Jack. He looked great & had gathered a good crowd around him. On my other side, another speaker stood on the ground, his back to a Stars and Stripes flag securely attached to the fence. He had a good crowd around him too. I could see there was serious competition for an audience, so I had to give them something good. Seeing me up on the crate, a couple of passers by stopped. I waited a couple of beats more as a few others slowed down. At an audience count of around ten, several of whom I recognised from the preceding days of the voyage of the BPB I began: I COME HERE NOT TO PRAISE AUGUST BUSCH BUT TO BLAME HIM.

Half an hour later (it seemed so but may have been a lot less) having beaten Budweiser into the ground, having wrecked Sea World's UK tourism prospects for the foreseeable future, and having totally forgotten to mention CORKY'S MARVELLOUS FREEDOM BANNER, and also being rather hoarse by then, I stood with the really interested remnants of my audience and chatted on a bit longer. First there was a couple from San Diego. They love Sea World. They know all about Corky too, and despite the irresistible case I'd just made for Corky's freedom, they think Corky's home is Sea World, and they're her family too. Oh dear, could I have failed? What followed was actually quite an interesting discussion, and I thought, at the end, that there was a good chance they would use their Sea World Pass to spend a couple of hours watching Corky in her holding tank, seeing whether what I'd said about what they'd see might be true... i.e. exactly where Corky would breathe, and precisely where she would turn upside down and right side up as she circled her tank, around and around and around. It didn't feel quite like a conversion though, more like a glimmer of light through an opening door. As they strolled away, the man turned, smiling, and offered "I agree with you about one thing though, I can't stand Budweiser beer either." OK. I was really happy to talk to the next person, a cheerful young fellow from Israel, who thinks it's great that his country is now against keeping captive dolphins (close, but not quite true) and hopes that Corky will make it home. Would you believe it? By now the sun is shining and there's more blue sky than grey, and quickly, the BANNER is dry again. The scene relaxes into another sunny Sunday in the park. A couple of Bobbies stroll by, smiling at the messages on CORKY'S GREAT FREEDOM BANNER. Who could imagine that this great city had been ground to a standstill by terror bomb threats just days ago? Not me. It was all just lovely, even if I was having a bit of trouble talking.

The next time black clouds headed our way, we decided to wind things up, satisfied. Soon, GREAT BANNER and all, we were back snuggled into the cosy bosom of our BPB, headed for a night out in London town. That was pretty nice too.

Thanks London! Thanks Doug! Pete! Judy! Christian! Paul! Chris!

Next, DUBLIN.

I guess we're going to find out what the luck of the Irish is all about.

Right now we're in that lovely land called Wales. The language here seems entirely incomprehensible to me... even the road signs, with their 'Canol y dref' directions & such. The BPB is rolling sweetly along past lush green fields bounded by stone walls and speckled with woolly white lumps with their heads down. If the sheep are speaking at all between chews on this miserable day, they must be bleating brrrrr not baaaa. The ocean rolling into the beaches is streaked white. The windshield wipers have been going non stop for hours. We're promised 500 people on the beach in Dublin tomorrow to help FREE CORKY!

About this time my mum would probably say...

CRIKEY.

I do hope you're all fine too.

cheers, Paul.



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