



Cologne - Manchester in 24 Hours

Veronika Schubert spends three months in Manchester, where she collects stories about language, people and everyday life to be told in *back view*. Travelling by bus from Cologne via London to Manchester, she moves among cultures and meets some fat grey squirrels.



Goodbye Germany!

The night is cold, wet and dark. The typical humming noises of cars, buses and people fill the coach station and fill my ears. My luggage is heavy, and I have finally found the coach that will take me to London.

The grumpy driver addresses me in Polish. A woman in the front row starts laughing, he must have made a joke. Straight-faced, I show him my ticket. He sends me to the storage compartment and flings my huge backpack inside the belly of the coach. Relieved of 20 kg, I get on the bus. Through the window, the Cologne Cathedral waves me an illuminated goodbye. At the front end of the bus, red digits glow the time.

18:30 – time to leave. The engine starts, and off we go. Trees and lights and signs whisk by. The softer hum of human voices fill the warm inside of the coach. Here I am, on the way to Manchester, where I'm going to stay for 3 months, living with a family I've never met before, doing an internship I haven't yet been told much about. One English winter is waiting for me. This is my adventure.



Bus One: London

20:40 Aachen, then the illuminated Belgian motorway glowing in some sick shade of orange. The hum dies down, we get used to travelling, some read, some sleep. Two men in the rear talk about immigration, compare their experiences. I knit, eat, read, sleep, look out of the window. This orange night seems endless.



23:12 Brussels. Most people get off, new passengers hop on. „Is there a seat left for a French guy?“ The French guy is tall and long-haired. I wave my hand. „Here!“ His name is Auguste, he's a cook in Bristol.

01:30 Calais. Have I overslept the Netherlands? The port is huge and looks deserted. Cold lights, countless containers crammed between two horizons. We leave the coach to pass border controls. First the French, then the British. People from outside the EU have to fill in forms, and the officials ask them questions about why they are staying where for how long. I'm sleepy and sure my face must be much too crumpled to be recognisable, but they just wave me through. They only question people who don't look Caucasian, and I feel strange about it.

Back on our coach we wait to get onto the ferry. An elderly couple right behind me are having a curious conversation. He's obviously English, asking her in perfect RP about the book she's reading. She's German, answering his questions in an English with a heavy German accent, generously peppered with German words. Some of her sentences cannot possibly make any sense to one who doesn't know German, but they seem to understand each other quite well.

2:06 We're swallowed by the giant ferry. Everybody gets off the coach to find themselves a nice armchair or sofa in the dining room. Some seem to be quite used to these nightly voyages as they immediately head for the most comfortable sofas and lie down. One man has brought a sleeping-bag. I'd like to see the night sea but am much too tired, so I do as all the others do and fall asleep on one of the leather couches.

Later I do get up to see the night sea. It's beautifully black and streaked with white froth. A fresh breeze on my face and in my hair, and I'm happy to be just where I am. The sea always does this to me.

3:30 Dover. The time shift has made us the present of one hour. Back on the bus and right into the left-hand driving. The roads are narrow, winding and lined with bushes. The orange light has been replaced by sheer darkness, and for some reason we're now going at breakneck speed. Is the driver mistaking kilometres for miles? I go to sleep again.



London – not quite a Walk in the Park

5:00 London. Drizzle in the cold night air. With my huge backpack on again, I browse Victoria Station in search of a cash machine and am finally holding my first 100 British pounds in hand. Breakfast. I leave my luggage in a locker. Next thing: get a UK SIM card. Asking two English-looking ladies for help, I find they're Norwegian and from the one city I had once spent an Erasmus year in. They have no idea where I might get a SIM card, but we chat a while in Norwegian and det er bare så hyggelig å snakke norsk igjen!

In the end I get my SIM card in a little shop at the station. The shopkeeper looks Indian and is very friendly. With my new card, I can call Bangladesh, China and India for only 1p/min. Germany is 5p/min.

8:00 Eventually, light has come to London and a grey day is dawning. I still have 5 hours before my coach leaves, and Buckingham Palace is close by, so I decide to visit it. The traffic is crazy. Cars keep coming from impossible



directions. But the British are nice and circumspect, so all the crossings are equipped with little signs indicating the direction where cars can be expected to be coming from, and I always get safely to the other side.

On the way is St. James's Park with long stretches of green lawn, beautiful old trees and masses of fat grey squirrels. These aren't in the least afraid of humans and watch me fiercely as I pass by without feeding them. There are also masses of crows, but they're more polite.

Buckingham Palace is pretty, but I don't see the Queen. Only groups of tourists. I ask one of them to take a picture of me in front of Buckingham Palace. Now I have a picture of me in front of Buckingham Palace! I walk back, get lost, ask somebody, find my way to Victoria Station and have a rest. I'm beat and sit down on a bench to have lunch. Somehow I kill the remaining hours and am finally sitting on a plastic seat in front of the gate.



Bus Two: Manchester

12:00 The waiting hall is quite crowded and I'm impressed by the multicultural look. There are as many Caucasian-looking people as there are Black or Asian-looking ones, and I like it. In a mixed crowd like this, nobody is sticking out.

Suddenly I hear shouting behind me. A man standing is yelling at a sitting woman. „Get out of my house! You have been here for only five minutes! Get out of my house!” He is white, she is black. Everybody freezes and stares. Even though I'm not British and don't know this crazy guy, I feel thoroughly ashamed for him. Eventually, a man chases him away. A woman shouts after him, „Get a life!”, and apologises to the Black woman.

12:30 Our bus has arrived, the gate is open. Everybody queues up, and two very nice men check our tickets and store our luggage. Overwhelmed, I collapse into a seat and fall asleep.

17:30 Manchester. Night has fallen again. I drag myself off the coach and down the road to meet up with my host mother. There she is, arms wide open. We haven't met before, but she receives me like a long-lost daughter. There I am, finally arrived in Manchester, my home for the 3 months to come.

(Text and pictures: Veronika Schubert)