

Starbucking

Chapter Five Growth and Development

“I’m traveling across the sea.”

From 1999 to 2016 I traveled to the United Kingdom ten times, so many that I had to dive into my own journals to recall the many trips. During those seventeen years, I changed as a person, my priorities shifted, and I turned into a passionate Anglophile. By focusing on my UK travels, I can present an high-level overview of Starbucking history from this specific perspective that is dear to my heart. Ironically, I had no particular interest in the UK before that first trip, and even when I was finally able to afford the time and expense to travel overseas, my priorities were elsewhere. Star Wars had been one of my many passions since childhood, and in the months before the May 1999 release of *Star Wars: Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, my excitement was at a fever pitch.

Believe it or not, my Star Wars fandom was so intense that a few months after the release of *TPM* (to poor reviews and fan backlash), I ended up spending a few hours in a county jail near Paducah. Earlier that evening I found myself at a random bar on the edge of town, enjoying shots of my go-to drink, Rumpel Minze. I was well into my cups when I overheard a trio of yokels talking smack about Jar Jar Binks, and I was sure that I sensed racial undertones in their mockery.

In a heartbeat, I lost it and rushed head first into the group, with rather predictable results.

The three whupped the tar out of me, and then a not-unattractive sheriff's

deputy walked in and carted me off to jail, where she put me in a cell with a scrawny kid name Rucket (so called because his car was a real rust bucket). Rucket turned out to be a good kid despite his drunk driving, and he helped smooth over the shock of what had happened as I sobered up. A few hours later, several deputies returned to the station with a vanful of rowdy biker types who had been causing a ruckus at the local Walmart. The station did not have cells for all of us, so the sergeant decided to cut me loose without any paperwork, and that is why you will find no record that I was ever arrested in McCracken County, KY.

Given my passion for Star Wars, there was no way that I was leaving the country before the film's May 19 release. Of course, that delay before traveling meant that I had plenty of time to plan my trip, so that's exactly what I did, right?

Nope.

Although a year more experienced than when I took that first road trip, I was still a horrible planner, and by the time that I arrived at Heathrow Airport, I had not even created a list of British Starbucks, nor had I bothered to book a hostel. I had been warned that London is an expensive city, and I was already struggling with debt, but somehow my planning and budgeting had not improved. This time I lucked out by running into a friend of a friend who just happened to be on the same flight and had also failed to book a room. I split the cost of that night's room with her, but my overall lack of preparation, combined with inexperience, would end up making the trip more expensive than it should have been. Given that Starbucks continued to expand, I needed to be smarter about husbanding my resource in order to maximise my opportunities for travel.

I was thinking about none of this at the time, so excited was I to have arrived in London with my first overseas Starbucks on the horizon. Despite my lack of preparation, I asked around the soon found that first Starbucks, and I was pleased to see a card on the counter listing all of their locations in England. Only forty—totally doable, and after obtaining a map, I began to check stores off my list as I explored London with a gleeful fascination.

I finished most of the Starbucks in the city that same day, and the next I hired a car so that I could visit stores in Bristol, Bath, and Manchester. I also drove to Leeds, because it was listed on the card, but in yet another example of my unpreparedness, I had never thought to ask whether all the stores on that list were truly open for business. More time and money wasted, but I paid little concern to my wastefulness as I returned to London to finish off the rest of that initial crop of stores before heading off to Spain¹.

Even before I returned to America, I regretted that I had booked such a short trip to London, although my reasoning had been simple—I was only going for the Starbucks, and I had no idea that I would end up loving that city so much. Not long after my return, I began hoping for a return trip, but the next few years would bring difficulties in maintaining steady work, and the combination of less income plus more domestic Starbuckering made it impossible for me to afford overseas travel, even as Starbucks continued to expand its global presence into additional countries.

When I finally managed a return to London, in 2003, I was on the verge of bankruptcy and only made the trip because a variety show had awarded me airfare for two and hotel.² Even with the major costs taken care of, my bank account was almost nil, my credit cards at their limit and cut up, so I was forced to borrow from my mother for expenses, and I spent the duration of that second trip focused as much on budgeting as Starbuckering.

Despite the tight budget, that weeklong trip was a great experience, and for the first time I had a travel partner, Michelle, who literally screamed when I asked if she wanted to go.³ Michelle was a great travel buddy because she had a full schedule of things to do in London, and she was more than happy to let me to go off on my Starbuckering duties during the day while she took in the sights and museums. In the evenings, we would reconnect and find dinner, hit up a bar, or walk around interesting parts of London.

Starbuckeringwise, I had grown more adept over the course of four years, and,

¹ To see friend only, as Starbucks would not enter the Spanish market until 2002.

² *The Wayne Brady Show* in 2002, perhaps my most infamous media appearance because I hugged Richard Simmons to make amends for having walked past him without a greeting.

³ Michelle was an ex-girlfriend who loved travel, and when *The Wayne Brady Show* awarded me the two tickets, she was the first person I thought to take.

yes, this time I *did* have a list of all the stores in the nation. But because I had not yet been able to replace my stolen laptop⁴, I relied on a printed list and a physical map to locate stores, and I often found myself asking for directions. The London Underground, marvel of engineering that I soon grew to love, was immensely helpful, not only as a relatively inexpensive and quick way to move from store to store, but also because baristas or passers-by would often direct me to the next store by using a Tube station as a landmark.⁵

This trip was so efficient that I succeeded in visiting over one hundred of the city's Starbucks in just under a week, with plenty of time for other things!⁶ Besides spending time with Michelle in the evenings, I took time out from Starbucking to enjoy the sights and pop into various museums, my favourite being the Tate Modern. Better preparation and London's transportation system, combined with the astounding proliferation of Starbucks throughout the city certainly help me achieve so much in the time I had, but there was another factor, a rather surprising one, that sped up my tour. On the first day, a manager suggested that I visit the Starbucks Support Centre. Seemed like a good idea to me, so I reworked my route to head over to Parsons Green, and upon arrival I explained what I was doing and asked if they could send an email to all the stores to inform them of my visits.

What actually happened was amazing.

After a few minutes, the managing director of Starbucks UK, Clifford Burrows, came downstairs to greet me! We chatted about my project for a bit, and then he made a list of notable Starbucks that I had to see—Globe Theatre, Clink Street and St Katharine Docks, to name a few. Even better, he gave me a signed letter asking partners to show me the courtesy of a sample coffee! To date, Cliff is the highest-level Starbucks partner that I have met anywhere in the world, and also the kindest.⁷

As successful as that second trip was, my tight budget was a constant distraction, and I found myself skimping on meals during the day so that I

4 Another consequence of my mounting debt.

5 I love the London Underground so much that I still own a t-shirt depicting the iconic Tube map.

6 Nearly forty of those stores were ones that I had already visited in 1999 but not photographed, so I did not need to drink coffee from them.

7 A few years later, Burrows would transition to a role as president of Starbucks Coffee Americas and U.S., and in that role he would oversee a number of initiatives until beginning an extended leave of absence in 2019.

could afford dinner in the evenings. Although I had enough for things like a souvenir t-shirt or museum admission, I could not afford a piece of mapping software that I desperately wanted⁸, and I took great pains to manage the use of my camera so that I would not need to replace the batteries. I was thus quite relieved when my financial picture changed, shortly after that trip, and when I next returned to London, I was able to enjoy myself (and eat better) without being so concerned about pinching pennies.

That next trip arrived more quickly than I would have guessed, because once freed of suffocating debt and more successful at finding work, my software engineer's income was more than sufficient to allow more frequent travel. The improvement in my finances came in the nick of time, because Starbucks' aggressive expansion across North America and the world made it necessary for me to grab every available opportunity for travel, whether domestically, to nearby destinations like Canada, Mexico, or Puerto Rico, or even further abroad like Japan. In late 2004, as the holiday season approached, I was determined to get back to Europe, and I managed to find a reasonable fair to Paris, with the intention of also making my way to London then Spain.

Now, do you remember when I wrote that my planning ability had improved?

Well, you just go on ahead and scratch that thought, because traveling without a place to stay or a list of stores pales in comparison to the ridiculous “plan” that I hatched when I decided to fly to Paris. I took a redeye to Charles de Gaulle on December 31 with the idea that driving to London via the Channel Tunnel would be the cheapest and most flexible way to make the trip, but I had not bothered to do any research. For starters, when factoring in the rental car cost, petrol, and the cost of the Channel Tunnel passage, flying (or train) is obviously better, but the real hitch was that reservations may be required to cross the channel!

Had I not finished the my tour of Parisian Starbucks with time left over to chat with a barista, I might have wasted a drive from Paris to Calais, or, *even worse*, made it to England then found myself unable to return. When I told the her about my plan, she said that the crossing might be fairly expensive

⁸ Microsoft AutoRoute, then the best way to map stores until Google Maps was launched in 2005.

and might also require a reservation. My heart skipped a beat, and I immediately hopped onto the Eurotunnel website and learned that although I could indeed cross into England the next day, the next available return date was March 1!

Dafuq???

I immediately suspect that this was not accurate, but it was New Year's Eve, and I had no way to investigate. I was forced to abandon my plan and scramble for an alternative so I'd not “waste” several days in Paris before heading to Spain.⁹ I considered driving to Frankfurt, the nearest Germany city, but 580 km and back seemed like a poor use of my resources, so I started looking into airfares and found a reasonably priced itinerary—Paris-London London-Madrid Madrid-Paris (then back to JFK).¹⁰

By the time I finished booking the flights, I was exhausted, but also eager to ring in the New Year in Europe for the first time. I made my way to the Champs-Élysées where the crowds and excitement were unlike anything I had seen before, and afterwards it took a while to come down off that high so that I could sleep in the back of the car for a few hours before returning to the airport for an early flight to Luton.¹¹ That trip was my shortest, just two days, but I still managed nearly three dozen stores due to further improvements in my process. After half a decade of running on fumes, my budget finally allowed me to purchase mapping software, and in the same way that having the ability to see all stores on a map significantly improved my North American touring, my overseas travels became much more efficient with mapping. In fact, I might have checked as many as forty stores off my list in those two days, had it not been for the shortened hours due to the bank holiday.

9 Yes, I realise that to any other person traveling to France, the idea that without new Starbucks to see, time in Paris would be “wasted” seems utterly ridiculous, but that was my headspace at the time. Growth and development changed my perspective, though, and a decade later, a girlfriend would ask me to slow down our round-the-world trip to spend a few days in Paris, and that was fine with me because my priorities had shifted.

10 This itinerary was cost effective because Europe has a number of low-cost carriers, like EasyJet, that not only make it inexpensive to fly between countries, but also to change travel plans without incurring the hefty costs that American legacy carriers will charge.

11 London is served by six airports, and to date I have flown in or out of Heathrow (LHR), Luton (LTN), Gatwick (LGW), and Stansted (STN).

For the unacquainted, a *bank holiday* is what we Yanks call a federal holiday, and it is just one of the many Britishisms that I would learn during my travels. Of the many things that I love about the UK, regional words and phrases are high on my list. For example, did you know that the Brits say *Happy Christmas* instead of *Merry Christmas*? The first time I saw such a sign, I was initially confused, but then I was, like, *that's so cool!*

I had begun to notice British terms during my early trips—*lift, boot, lorry*, to name a few—and between my travels and the increasing availability of British shows in U.S., I was fully on board with British English by the end of the decade. So in love, in fact, that I am still engaged in an ongoing effort to adopt British words, phrases, and spelling as much as I can. Spelling—*favour* instead of *favor*; or *driving licence* instead of drivers license—are fairly easy, but changing my speech is rather more taxing to my aging brain. I try to force myself to say *trainer* instead of *sneakers* or *chips* instead of *fries*, but without the ability to hear British English on a day-to-day basis, I find it difficult to sustain their usage.¹²

As you might imagine, visiting more than thirty Starbucks in two days left time for nothing else, and when others learn of these rushed trips to foreign destinations, they are often shocked that I would dare to skip the usual tourist attractions. My response, which I maintain to this day, is that when I travel for Starbucking, I am not on “vacation”—I am working towards a goal just like a researcher documenting urban landscapes or an executive on business travel. Yes, Starbucking is fun, but it is also one of my primary goals in life, serious as a heart attack, and by the time that I arrived in London for the third time, I was determined to keep up with the company's explosive growth, no matter what it took. But even putting the Starbucking aside, the truth is that I have never enjoyed sightseeing, the way most people do it—visiting attractions just to take a selfie then tell friends and family that they were there. Instead, I prefer to be mentally engaged when I travel, whether trying to understand the artwork in museums or evaluating the food scene to discover new favourites. Even before I discovered Starbucks, I viewed travel through the same goal-oriented lens that informs the whole of my being.

Now, as far as London was concerned, third time was a charm, and the city

¹² I desperately want to want to pronounce *schedule* the British way, without having to think about it.

was starting to feel familiar. With my financial troubles resolved and the existence of reasonable airfare to Europe, I had every expectation of returning to England every few years, so I never felt that I *had to see everything* on any given trip. In fact, it was my confidence that I would return that allowed me to limit my London trip to just two days so that I could hurry off to Spain and add another country to my total. Technically I could have added more *stores* to my total had I remained in England, but a large part of the project's appeal is the discovery of new places, and throughout the lifetime of my quest, I have sought to find a balance between seeing every single store in a given area and moving on to the next destination.

Sure enough, later that year, I found myself back in merry old England. Finding myself in between gigs, I was able to schedule a longer trip, necessary to keep up with the expansion of Starbucks across the country. Necessity is the mother of invention, as they say, and I continued to learn from past trips and evolve my travel habits—for the first time, I tried heading overseas with only a backpack, and this simple change saved time in several ways. I was able to bolt from my seat and scurry up the aisle as soon as the plane stopped, and I was able to clear customs without waiting for luggage. Once in the city, I could move more quickly with no duffel bag to weigh me down, and I did not need to waste time detouring to my hostel so that I could lighten my load. Traveling with only a backpack proved so successful that I never again used a larger bag—in fact, I do not even own one.

One downside of traveling light was that I could not bring any bedding for the rental car, but as my travel budget increased, it was easier for me to spend a extra to save time. After a day and a half speeding through London, I hired a car and bought the necessary sheet, blanket, and pillow at the nearest Tesco. Of course, what I spent on bedding was a pittance compared to paying for rooming, but urban camping also saved time—countless hours that I did not have to drive to a hostel or hotel, check in, or lose sleep due to noisy guests. Every minute saved made a difference, because Starbucks' English expansion was not limited to London, and during that trip I broadened my exploration of England to its two other large cities, Birmingham and Manchester, plus smaller towns like Oxford and Chester. London is an endlessly fascinating,

world-class city, easily among my top five in the world, but only by spending time outside of London was I able to discover how charming the rest of England can be. I only had the car for two days, that was enough to appreciate the experience of driving Britain's motorways and byways, taking in the look and feel of its towns, and discovering the range of accents in different parts of the country.

While my budget for that trip was larger, I still had to limit my time overseas, in large part because the endless stream of new Starbucks in North America, plus my newfound Scrabble hobby, chewed up a big chunk of my disposable income. After a week, I returned to the States, where I would focus my time and money for a number of years before returning to the United Kingdom in 2009 for what would turn into one of the highlights of my decades of Starbucking.

By May of that year, I had managed to save around ten thousand dollars (with no debt), the most money my account had ever seen at one time. Once I finished my contract, those savings allowed me to plan an overseas trip with no fixed end date, beginning with a flight to Dublin. Upon arrival, I immediately hired a car and headed north, to Belfast, for my first tour of Northern Ireland, and I remember feeling quite surprised that there was no border between the two nations.¹³ The absence of land controls was just one of the many interesting facts about the UK that I would learn on that trip, and although I have already said that discovering new places has always been one of the appeals of Starbucking, I will add that I also enjoy learning new things by *experiencing them*, rather than from a book or website.¹⁴

After two days in Northern Ireland and then two days in Dublin, I hopped over to Great Britain, where, unlike past trips, this time I was dead set on visiting *every single Starbucks*. Over the course of four trips between 1999 and 2005, I had seen around 220 Starbucks in the United Kingdom; meanwhile, in the ten years since they entered the UK, Starbucks had opened over *seven hundred* locations.¹⁵

¹³ Although by that point I had already visited France, Italy, Spain, England, and Ireland, I had never before crossed a land border within the European Union.

¹⁴ For example, if you are on the M1 and A1 driving north from Dublin, the signs read “The North”, not “Northern Ireland”.

¹⁵ Additionally, Starbucks began licensing locations in the UK in 2005, and by 2009 dozens existed, primarily in airports and transport stations.

Yes, that number seemed overwhelming, but I had the time and the determination, so I went at it, one store at a time, although without the single-minded focus of my earlier trips. With five hundred stores outstanding across England, Wales, and Scotland, and the expectation that this tour would take well over a month, perhaps even two, I had no intention of putting my life on hold for so long. Instead, I had to adapt to “living” abroad for the duration of my travels, which meant figuring out how to take care of necessities like haircuts and laundry as well as keeping up with other interests like films and television shows. Years earlier, I had looked into contract work in London, but procuring a work visa is expensive, and agencies typically want a longer commitment. Proper living in England is unlikely to ever happen, so I was thrilled to have an opportunity to spend a few months in this place that I had grown to love.

Right out of the gate, my pace was slower—on that first day I took time out from Starbucks to check into my hostel early, wash my clothing, and see my first film in Europe in sixteen years.¹⁶ With a larger food budget, I made it a point of the trip to find the foods that I enjoyed—scones, crepes, Latin American meals, to name a few. I had already spent so much time in England that I had a growing list of favourite local brands, like Yeo Valley Yoghurt, Sainsbury's orange juice¹⁷, or devon scones from Marks & Spencer, and I often went out of my way to find them. I also sought out specific dishes, like chicken fried rice or dal tadka/makhani from restaurants throughout the United Kingdom, and I enjoyed comparing not only the quality of the individual dishes but also the regional differences in their preparation. I also sought out local specialties, like fish and chips, or the traditional English breakfast of bacon, eggs, grilled tomatoes, fried mushrooms, bangers, and baked beans.

The slower pace of that tour also afforded me the time to keep up with my entertainment passions. Films, of course, but also TV, because wifi speeds had reached the point at which it was possible to download entire episodes in a short time. I had also grown fond of theatre, and when I learned that Ethan

¹⁶ Despitemy diehard fandom for Sam Raimi after his trio of Spider-Man films, *Drag Me to Hell* turned out to be underwhelming.

¹⁷ Not from concentrate!

Hawke would be starring in performances of *A Winter's Tale* and *The Cherry Orchard* at the Old Vic, I jumped at the chance to attend. During subsequent trips, I would seek out opportunities for theatre-going, and my overall mindset from 2009 onward was to enjoy London as the world-class city that it is, rather than simply focusing on Starbucks.

I spent countless hours just walking around London and feeling amazed by things seen less often, if at all, in the United States. Buskers in the Underground, for example—I would often tip them, or stand and listen for a few minutes if not feeling rushed. Something almost never seen in most of America are the liberal expressions of sexuality common in Europe, like adverts with bare-breasted models, and in London I would encounter rows of apartments with signs reading “MODELS” on the doors, leading up to what are essentially brothels. Over in SOHO there were countless sex shops and hostess clubs where a drink with a lady could cost a pretty penny, or regular night clubs with scantily-clad hardbodied men dancing on a bar or working a pole. In other parts of the city, like Picadilly Circus or Leicester Square, the atmosphere was always so lively that I'd often walk through the area simply to soak in the energy. I was in no hurry to leave London, and more than happy to take my time working my way through all of its Starbucks.

Alas, my time in that great metropolis was cut short by another of those phenomena that are common in Europe, a transportation strike. That time it was the Tube that was the focus, but a knock-on effect was to turn the bus system into pure chaos, and I was forced to figure out the quickest way out of the city. Because of the strike, I could not get out to the airport, and the nearest car hire company had only two vehicles available, both Mercedes. I had never driven a Benz, and the last thing that I wanted was an attention-getting fancy car, but I had no choice and settled for the smaller one, a B-Class.

This Benzo became my home for the next five weeks, and as soon as I finished that day's stores, I set myself up with bedding and a pair of cheap pyjamas. Despite what I'd been told about the illegality of sleeping in a car in England¹⁸, I was surprised to discover that I was not bothered, either by

¹⁸ When I eventually thought to google the legality of sleeping in a car, I found no shortage of results debunking that bad info that I was given.

police or passers-by, not even once, and in most towns it was not that hard to find a place to park.¹⁹

After four previous trips, I was already quite familiar with London, but my experiences with other English cities and towns was cursory at best. My 2009 trip, in contrast, allowed me five full weeks of touring outside of London, plenty of time to appreciate that England is more than just London, and the United Kingdom is much more than just England. Driving around smaller cities and towns was fascinating, a process both of discovery and of puzzlement as I tried to figure out details like traffic signs, speed limits, one-way systems, tolls, parking regulations, all the while racking up penalty charges aplenty. I appreciated the combination of feeling challenged while still enjoying the relative familiarity of the UK, and that combination has factored highly in my transformation into a diehard Anglophile.

Of particular interest and delight were the range of regional accents that I encountered throughout the UK, and not even the voluminous quantity of television and film that I consumed had prepared me for just how much variation I would encounter. I had heard a Scottish accent before, of course—who hasn't, given the worldwide fame of Sean Connery. Still, I was taken aback by a cashier at Greggs bakery in Dunfermline whom I could barely understand. I had a similar experience at a cafe in a tiny Scottish town where I stopped for dinner. A young woman asked me about my laptop, and her accent was so thick that I asked her to repeat herself twice before I figured out what she was asking. Throughout England, Scotland, and Wales, whether in Carlisle or Liverpool or Birmingham, or clear on the other side of the isles in Kent, I noticed accents wholly foreign to me, and I loved every last one of them.

As you might imagine, spending nearly two months exploring a country was not without its hiccups, and my particular modality—steady movement and urban camping—increased the odds of encountering challenges. Back in London, for example, I learned the hard way that one should always read hostel (or hotel) reviews and search for “bedbugs”, and my negligence resulted in a week of fierce itching and more than *seventy welts* all over my

¹⁹ The one notable exception is Milton Keynes, a unique town that was planned in the 1960's with a modernist architecture that resulted in streets unsuitable for camping.

body. In Bristol, while waiting for an opening night screening of a film, I popped open my laptop to review photos, and the staff freaked out because of the piracy concern. Unwilling to risk leaving my computer in their office, I had to talk fast to persuade them to let me hang on to it while I watched the film.²⁰

One persistent challenge of my touring outside of London was that Starbucks keeps more limited hours than in the United States. Once I left the city, I was forced to abandon my relaxed pace and instead rush through the morning and afternoon, typically until 18:00 or 19:00, when stores in the smaller towns would close and thus force a hard stop.²¹ On occasion, the stores that I needed to visit in the morning did not open until 8:00 AM, sometimes 9:00 or 10:00 on weekends. These delays made it difficult to meet my target of ten stores a day, and overall I ended spending several hundred extra dollars during that UK tour.

Still, the total cost of that tour, well over \$4000, was more than worth it given how much I enjoyed those seven weeks of touring, and how much I treasure that experience to this day. When I arrived, I was already in love with London, and by the time I left, the entire nation held a warm place in my heart, and though I often grew weary of Starbucks' relentless expansion, I rooted for the company to build more stores across the UK so that I would have a reason to tour again.

Sadly, 2009 would be the last time that I toured the United Kingdom so extensively. Despite their hopes of replicating the success of their North American expansion, a significant percentage of Starbucks in the UK were not profitable, and by 2010, their losses had grown to almost £10m.²² In response, Starbucks UK slowed their growth and began to seek out additional licensed partners who would be willing to assume the risk of opening new locations. When I returned in 2011, only two dozen new corporate stores had been added, and by the next year that number had dropped to a mere dozen.

This decrease in new British Starbucks turned out to be serendipitous,

²⁰ *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*. I enjoyed it so much that I saw it *again* a few days later. Please don't judge me.

²¹ In extreme cases, some stores closed as early as 16:00.

²² "Starbucks losses in UK rise to £10m." *The Guardian* online. July 9, 2010.

<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2010/jul/09/starbucks-losses-rise-recession>

because by the spring of 2012, my priorities had shifted in two significant ways. Nearly a decade into my passion for tournament Scrabble, I had finally decided to become serious about playing with the lexicon published by Collins and used all over the world *except* the United States and Canada.²³ If not for this, I would likely have flown directly to Portugal or some other European city and skipped the UK altogether, but I was eager to test my Scrabbling ability against the more experienced Brits. For that reason, I went ahead and flew to Birmingham to compete in a two-day tournament in nearby Coventry, and Starbucks was almost an afterthought.²⁴

The second big change in my life was my discovery of craft coffee, a tectonic shift after sixteen years of drinking Starbucks. With the company's growth in the U.S. on hiatus²⁵, I had been focusing on lighter roasted third wave coffees for nearly a year, and I was eager to take my exploration abroad. After the Coventry tournament, I scooted up to Glasgow to see four Scottish Starbucks, then down to London to see another four Starbucks before dipping my toe into the British indie coffee scene with a visit to Prufrock Coffee. The cup I enjoyed at Prufrock was so good that when I returned to London the following year, I made a return to that cafe a priority, and from that point on I made sure to intermingle craft coffee with my English Scrabbling and Starbucking. Later that year, Starbucks would begin experimenting with franchising for the first time²⁶, and because franchised stores do not meet my Starbucking requirements, my 2015 and 2016 visits to the UK were again light on Starbucks but heavy on craft coffee and Scrabble, including back-to-back appearances at the British championship.²⁷

By that time that I made those final two trips across the pond, I felt as at home in London as I do in my own country. I scheduled more time than I needed for Starbucking in order to play more Scrabble and explore not only indie coffee but the broader food scene (like my newfound passion for Japanese ramen), spending time with friends, and sometimes just sitting at a cafe to study words, just as I would in America. In fact, my 2016 trip was scheduled for a reason unrelated to my primary hobbies—I went specifically

23 Thailand used to play with the Merriam-Webster lexicon, and Israel is split between Collins and MW.

24 I ended up doing quite well despite my relative inexperience with the lexicon—I placed second behind the British national champion.

25 After the Purge that followed the Great Recession, Starbucks put U.S. growth on hold for a number of years.

26 Only in the UK, and later in France.

27 At the 2015 BMSC I defeated that same national champion (from Coventry) in the final round to place eighth overall.

to see the inaugural run of *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, and I built the rest of my itinerary around that fantastic play.

Due to family circumstances and global pandemic, that trip was the last time I went overseas, and though I am often beset by a longing to return to other countries—Japan, Turkey and Germany to name a few—I think I miss the United Kingdom most of all. I have seen countless British shows in the years since that last trip, and many films with British casts, and every time that I hear a British accent or see the urban landscapes of London, I am filled with a desire to drop everything and book a flight. This is, of course, impossible at the moment due to the pandemic, and besides that I am limiting overseas travel because of its climate impact. For the time being, then, the only moments that I will spend in London will be in my own mind.