

Off the Beaten Patch: Maybe Kate and William Should Register in Walnut Creek

Walnut Creek. London, England. Shop 'till you drop and find the difference.

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There is nothing unusual about getting out your car and seeing Starbucks, H & M, Auntie Anne's and a Build-A-Bear Workshop. Except I wasn't in Walnut Creek, I was in suburban Surrey.

My English friend Rosie and I got out of the lift and I stopped dead in my tracks. "What's wrong?" she asked. "Nothing serious -- I just feel like I walked out of the elevator and into the Twilight Zone."

Except for the occasional Fish & Chips restaurant, shopping in Britain and shopping in Walnut Creek is getting to be one in the same.

I used to live in England and it continues to be my go-to place any time I take a vacation. Sure, McDonald's has been in Europe forever and there's something fun when you pay for a

Quarter Pounder in pounds, or order French Fries in France; but something's gone terribly amiss.

Go to any mall (pronounced mal-rhymes-with-pal) in England and you're sure to find a Banana Republic, Gap, Victoria's Secret and Claire's. At the St. George's shopping district in Harrow-on-the-Hill, you can take the kids to Gymboree or pop into the T-Mobile store in Guildford's Fairy Shopping Centre.

Looking for an Urban Outfitters or Apple store? You can find them at Churchill Square in Brighton. Oddly enough, what you won't find in Brighton, is Brighton Collectable. Go figure. Even one of my favorite Sussex bakeries -- where I like to go for my much needed fix of mince pie, lemon tart, ginger biscuits -- has turned into a trendy cupcake shop.

Mind you, we're not exactly keeping up our end of the lease either. Whether it's Clarks and Burberry at Broadway Plaza or Walkers shortbread and Boots cosmetics at Target, the British are coming. Fresh and Easy, which is owned by Tesco (one of the UK's leading grocery chains), is opening next year in Walnut Creek. Will Sainsbury's or even Marks and Spencer be far behind?

I'm delighted to say the British are taking a page from our book in the customer service department. Some of the more upscale -- what the British call up-market -- shopping districts now have an on-site concierge. At The Village in London where you'll find Tiffany & Co. they will arrange a chauffeur service, complete with a uniformed driver, for those shoppers who fancy going home in style.

Whether you're shopping on the High Street in England or on Main Street in Walnut Creek, there's nothing foreign about the complaining. The British queue up for the car park and winge at the hourly parking rate not unlike their American cousins. And small shops and independent retailers on both sides of the pond are fighting just to keep their doors open. But fear not. Even if one day there is a Starbucks on every corner, our two cultures are still oceans apart.

Oh yeah, and have a nice day.