

Transcript of Podcast 082: Mistletoe and Whine

{KIRA: Hate Whamageddon. I'm not Bruce Willis. Whamagetoutofhere! I don't want to do it! Refuse! {giggles} Can't. Shan't. Won't make me.}

{intro music - jaunty, bouncy}

{Intro standard announcement:

Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a podcast looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Enby with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the 'why's behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}

{Music fades. Podcast begins}

Hello :)

Well, you may be pleased to know I survived my trip to SE Asia. Now, that said, it was arguably more of a close-run thing than you might imagine. On the day we flew back, England was in the midst of a Named Storm (Fergus, apparently, tho the Germans called it Walter). This storm caused 124 km/h (77 mph) winds in Leeds, so I'd imagine the windspeeds in Manchester weren't too far short of that, and that very much affected our journey back. Even if we didn't know it at the time,

Imagine if you will, sitting in the middle of an aeroplane, so with no access to window views. All we have to go on is the in-seat entertainment system, and no knowledge of weather patterns or anything. The pilot had said 'there's a bit of wind in Manchester' but gave no further details.

We're tracking our journey and we fly over Huddersfield without issue. An easy path to Manchester Airport, you'd think. But no. We continue on our course, fly over Bury, and head towards Preston. We're looking at the route plan and going '... surely we need to turn left at some point'. Our 'expected time of arrival' gets slowly later and later. We fly over Preston .. and then do a huge loop to the right. 'Oh it's a holding pattern' suggests Laura. Meanwhile I'm there thinking 'wouldn't it be ironic if we were diverted to Glasgow for some reason'.

We did not divert to Glasgow. Maybe we should have done.

We did a big loop over Lancashire and then a smaller loop over Bolton and Darwen. If we'd've been near a window we'd've probably been able to see our apartment building in the distance. But then the pilot seems to have made a decision. The 'expected time of arrival' drops to eight minutes, and we head in a straight line over Stockport to the airport.

That was the most eight minutes I've ever had in an aeroplane. I'm not quite sure what it was the most *of*; possibly 'interesting' would be a good adjective, but when used in the sense of 'may you live in interesting times'. It was by far the bumpiest, roughest, most rollercoastery eight minutes I've ever had on an aeroplane. Looking at the cockpit view on the in-flight ents system was not good for the nerves; sometimes Knowledge Is Not Power. The atmosphere inside the plane was quite weird; it was a kind of reverential 'hush' - it felt very calm, and yet, and yet.

When we landed, and it was not a smooth or straight landing by any means, although interestingly not the hardest landing we'd had on our trip, I was genuinely expecting some applause from the passengers, but there was nothing. Apart from a palpable sense of relief.

The airport was strangely quiet when we walked through the terminal - it felt like there was nobody else there, which for an international airport on a Saturday evening felt weird. By the time we reached Manchester Airport's public transport interchange though, we'd learned two things:

Firstly, neither the railway nor the tram to the airport were running, due to separate incidents further up the line that had stopped all runnings - the tram had had a tree fall onto the power lines; it wasn't reported what the train issue was, suffice that they'd almost all been cancelled.

Secondly, we may have landed because we were a large intercontinental plane. A smaller Trans-European jet before us had aborted its landing just a few feet from the runway, and diverted to London Heathrow.

We got a taxi back to the flat, in the pouring rain. Possibly the most logical £40 taxi ride I've ever taken.

I ought to talk about the trip. But I don't think this is the podcast for that. I've not long had an out-of-schedule session with my therapist to talk about Matters Arising from it, so I'm going to leave it a bit to soak. That sounds more negative than it is; the trip just brought a couple of issues to mind about who I am and how I react to stimuli; it's nothing problematic.

Aside from that, I've not done a lot since my last non-pre-recorded episode. I did have another meetup with the Asexual group in Manchester, where we played boardgames, that was pretty cool, and I met up with another Asexual podcaster, completely by chance. They, and I'm going to call them they because I forgot to ask what their pronouns were, run a D&D podcast with asexual vibes, called, obviously, because it's such an easy identity to pun with, "Deck of Many Aces". They're up to 65 episodes at the time of this pod, but they recently had a 'Story So Far' episode so there's an easy 'in' to the storyline right there.

This pod is scheduled for release in the week between Christmas and New Year. This is traditionally a 'dead time' in Western Life, where time becomes arbitrary and vague, and the majority of people just take time off to ... and, see, here's where I'm conscious that I'm not a standard member of Western society. Like, I have a very small family, who themselves are very isolationist and like their own company. And, whisper it loudly, they're actually really boring. My mother might well listen to this pod, but she'll probably agree anyway. But also, because we're a very small family, we had a habit of meeting up quite regular anyway, during my childhood, so there's absolutely no pressure or expectation to do the same at Christmas. Consequently, we don't. My uncle and my mother like each other but not enough to travel the entire height of Wales to meet up for reasons outside emergency or chaos. Anyway they both have their own immediate familial issues. Plus of course I don't drive and this country's public transport shuts down over Christmas anyway.

I'm writing this pod before Christmas Day itself, but I don't imagine my Christmas Day will be anything particularly notable. It's a more awkward Sunday, that's all it is for me. I'll have almost certainly spent it online, or writing blog posts, and eating cheese sandwiches. Assuming I can get hold of the bread. It's just not very interesting or consequential for me. And I was in the office today, when I'm writing this part of the pod, which is Thursday 21st, and I overheard someone in another department (technically a completely different organisation, but that'd be too revealing about where I work) have a conversation about Christmas Dinners and whether Yorkshire Puddings belong on it, and I'm there thinking 'y'all're planning Christmas Dinners in that much depth?'. But then I remember that I'm not the target market for that sort of thing anyway.

But I truly hope you all have had a wonderful and loving Christmas, in the company of people you care for. I'll have spent it with Laura, who'll've worked it anyway, but I'm sure there will have been beer in the evening. And whisky. Last time I went up to Glasgow I came back with a bottle of whisky from the Ardnamurchan brewery, in remembrance of my Hike Across Great Britain ending in that part of the world, and at the time of the pod we've drunk half of it. I'd get some more next time I'm up, but the likelihood is I'll be going straight from there to another trip away.

The next Traverse travel blogger conference is being held at the start of February in Tbilisi, the capital of the country of Georgia. I've never been to Georgia, and that's one of the reasons my friends think I ought to go to the conference. It's always been on my list, along with neighbouring Azerbaijan and Armenia, but I didn't anticipate going there in Winter, which restricts my options somewhat. The other thing that's restricting me is Azerbaijan has more-or-less closed its land borders, officially because of Covid, but possibly to prevent an influx of Russians escaping army conscription. It is possible to exit the country overland (just not enter it), but as they've cancelled the trains and the buses, this involves an awful lot of admin and hassle and taxis to cross it. And the flights from Baku to Tbilisi is only about £50, it doesn't seem worth it. I am fully aware of the 'oh but we shouldn't be flying such small distances' view, but, like, it's longer, more awkward, and more expensive to go overland, and I only have two weeks, so, you know, take it up with the Azerbaijani government, not me.

My main irk with the trip is I don't get the chance to visit Abkhazia, Mainly because visiting a seaside resort, even that far south, in Winter, won't be an exciting experience. We won't talk about the politics of the situation and/or environment.

Laura thinks I should target having visited 100 countries by the time I reach 50 years old. I'm currently on 87 (I think), with the caveat that it depends how you define Kosovo. I'm a data analyst; it's why I generally don't count countries. Far too many questions of definition. It's an interesting target. There's three places in the world I have intentions to visit that could encompass five or six countries, but they would all involve intense and

specific trips and I don't think I could do more than one in the timescale. There are, though, a couple of countries I could easily visit for a long weekend or a week-long adventure. Sadly one of them is Norway. It'd be cheaper to visit Kiribati. Maybe.

Anyway. It's Christmas. I should do a pod about this time of year. Now, according to my podcast listening stats, my biggest audience is in the USA. Hello :) I'm low-key surprised by this, but in a way it oughtn't surprise me because clearly the USA has the biggest podcast listenership audience by volume in the world. My second biggest audience is the UK, which makes more sense in a way because I'm British and I tend to not hide that fact with my wording and style. And, for those of you who read my transcripts, my writings.

Now, my flatmate is American. She's originally from Minnesota, a state that I've never been to but which I've been told I'd probably appreciate. But that's not the point. Rather, Laura is very fond of Christmas. Our Christmas tree went up on 9th November; it would have been earlier but she was overly conscious of our flat being visible from the apartments 'over there', people we don't know, have never met, and who have no idea of our existence, and she was concerned that if she'd put the Christmas tree up while I was away at the end of October, people would have judged her, I don't know.

Anyway. Her local radio station in Minneapolis changes every year to Christmas music in mid-November. As an aside, this whole concept of radio stations changing format confuses me entirely; there's pretty much no such thing as 'formats' of UK radio stations. I do want to do a whole pod on local radio at some point, but I fear it may end up being a rant against capitalism, but that's by the by, Suffice to say, in broad terms, there's no such thing as 'format' in the UK, and the vast majority of local radio stations play 'top 40' or 'the best music of the 80s, 90s, and today', which comes to the same thing just with added cheese,

But what her playing of Kool 108 has shown to me is that there's a large difference between US Christmas Music and UK Christmas Music. I don't know if that's because, for just longer than my lifetime, there's been a fetish in the UK for Christmas-adjacent music, or if the USA, as a rule, prefers older music, but ...

There is an overlap. That overlap is 'Wonderful Christmertime' by Paul McCartney, and 'Last Christmas' by Wham. Kool108's playlist is much more trad-pop. Think originals of the likes of 'Sleigh Ride', 'It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas', 'I saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus', and, of course, 'White Christmas'. Not a Slade, Wizzard, or Jonah Lewie to be heard. YMMV on which is better; it's just something that takes some getting used to,

Indeed back in 2012 there was a TV programme dedicated to deciding what The Nation's Favourite Christmas Song was. There's only about three or four on that list that would be heard on Kool 108, and a further one that would never be played in the format we know it in. Because they prefer the original of Little Drummer Boy rather than the version we have with David Bowie where he ... doesn't sing it.

[Hello, it's Barefoot Backpacker from the Future here, just to say I forgot completely about Whamageddon, which is this ridiculous game that's been going for years, where you have to last from midnight on 1st Dec to 11:59pm on 24th Dec without knowingly hearing 'Last Christmas' by Wham. Only the original version counts; remixes and cover versions are safe and fine. And announcers have got in trouble at football grounds etc for playing it over the speakers; it's taken right seriously. Which leads open the thought though, as remixes don't count, you could take the original version and rip the audio off leaving just the instrumental. So people will listen and go 'ah bugger', but then 20 seconds later go 'hang on a minute ...'. Anyway, back to the already-recorded episode]

As a vague aside, my favourite Christmas songs are ones never played in either country, because uber-niche. I've not heard "Santa Claus is on the Dole" by Spitting Image on the radio since it was released, and I've never heard 'I hate Christmas Parties' by Matthew Thiessen and the Earthquakes outside of my own computer. And before anyone with an expert knowledge of Christian Pop Music tries to correct me, yes that *was* how they were billed on that particular release, rather than as Relient K.

But I digress, Obviously.

The other difference is that Christmas seems to stop, with regard to music anyway, at 11.59pm on Christmas Day. Whereas we'll have Christmas-related songs still in rotation until New Year. And there seems to be a vibe of taking Christmas decorations down as soon as Christmas is over (or by New Year at least), whereas we'll tend to keep them up until Twelfth Night. After all, The Twelve Days of Christmas is a Christmas song. In fact,

there's some old English folklore that suggests Christmas decorations ought to be kept up until 1st February (or, to be specific, Candlemas, February 2nd). On the one hand this feels excessive, On the other hand, in a way Christmas feels like it's at the wrong time of year. Obviously Christmas Day is December 25th for Reasons, and the Solstice is a small number of days before, but, certainly here in the UK, and I believe in most of the rest of the world too outside the tropics, the 'middle of Winter' and 'middle of Summer' climatically aren't solstice-adjacent but somewhere around a month later, maybe up to a week or two beyond that. Certainly February feels the most bleak month in the UK, and our school summer holidays are in August (in England, anyway; Scotland's a tad earlier but that's more because of daylight than temperature), so I'd say 1st February is around The Most Wintery Time here, so having fairy lights and shiny tinsel covering the house around then might make the season a bit more pleasant.

But not mistletoe though. I've never kissed anyone under the mistletoe. Obviously.

And of course songs like Sleigh Ride and Jingle Bells don't mention Christmas at all. Not that we have anywhere near enough snow in this country to have anything remotely resembling a viable sleigh ride, even in early February, they strike me as songs better suited to that time of year than this one.

The bleakest winter I can recall in recent times was 2010. We had snow up to my shin, and I didn't see a work colleague for six weeks cos she lived down a farm track in deepest Staffordshire, somewhere near Alton Towers, and the gritters couldn't get down her road so it was too icy to drive. Where I lived in Nottinghamshire was at the bottom of a big hill and it was genuinely dangerous to walk. I'm sure you could have skied down it, or at least tobogganed. If it weren't for the really sharp bend halfway down. I mean, maybe that adds to the appeal, I don't know; winter sports are generally something I'd never do. Had I been the same person but Scandinavian, I might, might, have dabbled in cross-country skiing, but oh my that's a sport that requires good muscles.

This is not a pod episode about winter sports. There's a reason for that, the same reason I've never done a pod about travelling with a family, despite the latter having been pencilled in since 2018. Rather, this is a pod about Christmas that was cobbled together at the last moment.

I talked a little earlier about Christmas decorations, and specifically the tree. Now, over here there's always that discussion about 'so shall we get a real tree this year', and no, you'll get an artificial tree like you always do because it's much easier to construct, you can keep it forever, and you won't be finding pine needles in your carpet in June. Another good reason for laminate flooring, by the way, it's easier to vacuum. Dancing barefoot on soft carpet with your loved one might be more romantic, but it's a lot more precarious. Not that I'd know about that sort of thing.

Anyway. The tree. Traditionally, decorated with tinsel (a fire hazard), fairy lights (a potential fire hazard), and weird ornaments that when I was growing up were invariably big balls, small wooden figures in cars, and coins made of chocolate. Which if you over-decorated could be a falling hazard. And possibly a fire hazard in at least two ways, The balls, or baubles, would come in very different sizes, be generally of a single but shiny colour (like red), and, well, I mean, they look quite glittery and cool but I never quite knew what they had to do with Christmas. There's usually also something on the top of the tree - an angel or a star for the more religious, a fairy for those more secular. I'm surprised it's not an elf-on-the-shelf, just watching your every move.

The tree that's up in my apartment, which I'm not in control of, has no tinsel or any of that encumbrance; it only has fairy lights. Three sets. It's next to a power socket with two plug holes. It always seems like a faff to unplug every night, but it looks nice, for sure.

There's no other decoration in the apartment. When I was younger, I was used to tinsel hanging over doorways and from the ceiling in dubious places, wreaths on the doors, and excessive amounts of plastic holly. To be fair I still see this in the wild today; some pubs in Manchester have been covered with the stuff on the outside, being all green and red. If I'm being honest, I suspect they just repurposed the stuff they used to commemorate Remembrance Sunday.

Now at this point, let me introduce someone who has been on my podcast before, albeit only in passing. Of all people, I've got a couple of short contributions in this episode from my very own mother! Here she talks a little about Christmas decorations when she was growing up in the 1950s. Call it 'living history'.

{MOTHER: We always used to have, me mum used to start, and everyone's mum used to start putting

decorations up about three weeks, three or four weeks before Christmas came. There was always plenty of streamers, mainly home-made, loads of balloons, everyone sent cards to everyone else, and the Christmas tree was usually picked up by me dad. It was usually a real tree, because I don't think they had false Christmas trees in the early 50s. And there's little baubles and things on that, again mainly home-made. At school you'd make like little angels and things like that.}

Talking of trees, here's my friend Anne-Laure talking about a part of her Christmasses growing up. This, by the way, is the lady I went to Ireland with on a road-trip in the summer of 2022. Although French, as you'll hear about later, she grew up somewhere you might not expect to have much of a Christmas vibe,

{ANNE-LAURE: Even tho I grew up in Tunisia, which is a Muslim country, we never had any problem finding a Christmas tree. Usually somewhere around early December, my father would go to the central market in the centre of town and pick up one. We would put it up and celebrate Christmas. I was lavished with gifts. The tree would stay up until somewhere round early February, which is when my mother would start screaming because it was, you know, falling apart, and we had to put it down.}

So basically this is how we would celebrate Christmas. No fancy meal, no celebration of any kind really except tree and gifts.}

Interestingly, her mother is Vietnamese and she has a strong connection with Viet culture. When I was there at the start of this month, our hotel in Hanoi was located in the Old Town and next to a street which was completely lined with Christmas shops,. Tinsel, ornaments, Santa Claus memorabilia, and we even saw people riding motorbikes through the streets with fully-decorated Christmas trees wrapped in plastic on the back of them. It made it very easy to find our hotel, for sure, but it was ... I don't know, it was certainly something I wasn't expecting to see there, that's for sure.

Someone else who has spent many a Christmas away from the country I most associate with them is Amanda Kendle, whose podcast (The Thoughtful Travel Pod) I'd advertise more but let's face it, she doesn't need my promotion. At some point soon she'll reach a million downloads. I once asked her what her secret was to having a popular podcast and she said she didn't know. Clearly she knows. I might have to interrogate her when she visits in April. My electric toothbrush will be charged and ready.

{AMANDA: I grew up in Perth, Western Australia, and I live there still, but I did have a handful of Christmasses when I lived abroad. When I lived in Japan it was like Christmas didn't exist because it doesn't really there, but when I lived in Europe then I finally understood basically I understood all the songs we'd always been singing at Christmas time, I understood what snow would be like at Christmas, and all of the Christmassy stereotypes and especially, I was living in Germany where there were of course amazing Christmas markets, and I had a Christmas up in Finland near the Arctic Circle, and met the real Santa, and so those are like what I consider to be proper Christmasses.}

Actually that's a solid point that I want to make a bit more of. Remember earlier I was talking about Christmas songs? Have a think about all the Christmas songs and seasonal/festive songs you know. Do they involve snow, cold weather, wrapping up warm? Like, one of the songs oft played at Christmas is literally called 'Baby It's Cold Outside' (no I'm not going to get into a discussion about that song; that's been done to death), another is called 'Let it Snow! Let it Snow! Let it Snow!'. There's a theme developing here, and one that's very ... northern-centric.

Amanda gave me the vibe from the opposite side of the world, where Christmas does not fall in the cold season.

{AMANDA: here in Australia the way we tend to celebrate is pretty low-key, but it's pleasant and delightful and fun. Of course Christmas occurs during summertime here, this year Christmas just gone yesterday, it was here in Perth in the mid-30s Celsius, so pretty hot and pretty typical for a Christmas in Australia, and because of that we tend not to have a traditional Christmas meal any more; when I was younger that was super-common, but these days we're, most Australians are more likely to have cold meats or seafoods and salads and stuff that's not too heavy and not too much time in a hot kitchen to prepare, but some people do still have a really traditional Christmas meal.}

That's pretty much how Christmas works here for us, and I think for a fair few Australians because of course it's summer. But it's also near the start of our very long summer school holiday, so for families it's often a time

to get away and just to be, yeh, relaxed.}

Every time I've been to Australia it's been in their Winter, and it's still been, aside from a venture into the lowlands of the Grampian Mountains in Victoria state, warmer than it's been in the UK. It's rare and notable when temperatures reach into the 30s Celsius in the UK, especially in Scotland where I was for the last two years,. I'm of the cultural background where I pretty much melt if it gets to over about 24 degrees Celsius, which, for my American listeners, is 75 degrees Fahrenheit. Also remember though, the nearest place of any significance at my latitude in North America is Edmonton, halfway up the Canadian province of Alberta. *{pause}* It's really quite impressive I'm The Barefoot Backpacker, really.

I've never experienced an Australian summer, but one year my penpal in Queensland messaged me to say she was spending the day in the bath (a full bath of cold water) because it was the coolest place she could find. I would, probably, die. A question comes up; would I rather Plus 40 Celsius (104 Fahrenheit) or -40 Celsius (same in F). The answer is, let's be honest, NO, but instinctively I've always felt at least in cold weather you can put more clothing on; in hot weather there comes a point where it's impossible to go outside. Or inside without aircon. Which most houses in the UK don't have, because it never gets that hot. I'm more likely to experience plus 40 degrees, but I'd rather not do either, thank you very much. I'm fully aware minus 40 brings its own issues, but holistically it's easier to mitigate for. As an aside, UK housing isn't built for the cold either. It's designed to keep up dry, that's pretty much it, and given how many houses have issues with mould and damp, I'm wondering even about that.

I'm not moving to Ulaanbaatar any time soon; a capital city that experiences both as standard, I went there once. It was at the start of May. It was a comfortable single figure Celsius, or around 40 Fahrenheit. There was still ice in the rivers, It was fine.

{section separation jingle}

I was trying to see if I could go through this episode with an natural rhythm, without using my section separation jingle, but I couldn't think of a natural segue. Oh wells,

I want to talk a bit about Christmas Markets. They're something that are seen as standard issue in Northern Europe, and I know several people who've been in places like Germany and Austria over Christmas, either as a tourist or a resident, Indeed you heard mention of that from Amanda earlier. My flatmate Laura lived in Freiburg for a time and loves Christmas markets. You won't be hearing from her in this episode because she's in London and working too hard. We are very different people.

Although she lives at almost exactly the wrong end of France, Anne-Laure told me about continental Christmas markets that she'd experienced.

{ANNE-LAURE: There are many Christmas markets in France. Some are more exuberant than others. The most famous one would be the one in Strasbourg, which is the city in the northern, eastern part of the country. It dates back to year 1570 ish something. It has like 300 stalls scattered around all the city. The streets are decorated, the houses are, and it's very beautiful and very Christmas like.

In Toulouse where I live there is one as well but a much smaller one. It's in the Place du Capital which is basically the centre of centre-town. You can find, well, mostly food, toys for children, or gifts, whatever gifts you might be interested in. There's also a craft-man Christmas market, which is a bit further from centre town, and it's more authentic. Maybe not in the Christmas-like theme things, but more natural, I'd say.

I used to like to go to the Christmas market mainly for food, bite me! So I would have churros, I would have aligot, aligot is a French speciality, basically it's cheese and potatoes. It has the consistency of cream, it's delicious really.

But the whole market is more commercial thing really. You have stalls that represent shops that are just around the city, which is not that interesting in my opinion. But, hey, you know, food.

This year, it doesn't happen every year, but this year they also put out a small ice-skating arena, which is nice. You can of course have the mandatory picture with Santa Claus, and also I think it's the first time I've noticed it, there's a Vegan Christmas market, which is, yes, so weird to me. It doesn't sound as Christmassy to me, But some people seen it (?) so who am I to judge.}

I currently live in Greater Manchester, and for the last two years I lived in Glasgow. It's interesting to compare the two, actually, and to Birmingham, where I lived for far more years than I care to acknowledge, Glasgow's Christmas Markets were pretty much only in two places - the bulk was in St George's Square, in the north-centre of the city, by the town hall and Queen Street railway station. It's a decently-sized area, but holistically it's a town square and therefore not a big space, It's generally got an array of food and drink stalls, and a ferris wheel which me and Laura went on last year and it wasn't as bad as I'd feared (I don't like heights), with the proviso that while a very fascinating and quite aesthetic city in close proximity, it's not the most interesting looking from a height. The other part of the Christmas Market was in the south of the city centre, near St Enoch subway station. There were a smaller number of stalls, and a fairground ride that involved being spun around at high speed and swung a lot. Obviously I didn't go on it. I can't think of much that'd be worse. Like, I'd rather have sex, and that's saying something.

According to a news report, Manchester's Christmas market was smaller than usual. This confused me. Mainly because Manchester's Christmas market this year was in about 452 separate locations across the city centre, some of which I never even made it to. Including the ice-rink, which apparently was in the bit of the market near the Cathedral. While the bulk of the markets were in Piccadilly Gardens (and one day I'll do a pod about Manchester where I'll point out that Piccadilly Gardens and Piccadilly Railway Station are further away from each other than you might imagine), many of the wide pedestrian city streets had market stalls on them. We tended towards King Street; it was quieter and there were two large stalls next to each other, one of which sold mulled wine, the other sold craft beer, and that suited both me and Laura.

Nottingham is supposed to have one of the largest Christmas markets in the country, but that's probably because Nottingham's Old Market Square is pretty large for a UK city main square. The stalls spread out down Long Row as well, one of the main pedestrianised streets in the centre that comes off Old Market Square, but that's pretty much all it is, Lots of the same things in a slightly different order. Old Market Square is also big enough for an ice-rink; in summer they install a beach on it too; most of the time it's just a large pedestrianised square with a water feature at one end and the town hall at the other. And lots of pigeons. And a Greggs that's almost, bit not quite, a 24 hour pastry shop.

Birmingham's a bit odd because of the way the city is designed, but traditionally the market runs the entire length of New Street (a distance of about 500m), and occupies the entirety of Victoria Square, which is where the bulk of the alcohol is. It's quite a long way from one end to the other, but it's not very wide, which causes logistical issues. At least with Manchester there's completely separate segments of it so it doesn't feel as crowded.

My problem with Christmas Markets, and I would say in the UK but I did visit one in Vienna on my Inter-Rail trip in 2019, is that they're mostly not designed for someone like me. Apart from the food and the drink, both of which are slightly overpriced, they mostly seem to sell quite a lot of tat. Or rather, stuff that I don't think I'd ever need, or want, for far more money than Poundworld sells very similar tat for that I don't buy there either. Or maybe it's because I don't have children. But small wooden decorative objects, other kinds of home decor, and artisanal cheese. Not on my radar, The market in Vienna did sell cookie cutters in the shape of feet and I was tempted to get one for branding reasons but didn't because I never do anything with pastry. Overall, they bore me, because I'd simply never buy that stuff in everyday life anyway. I don't *need* a Christmas-themed tea-towel. I don't *need* a weird mantelpiece ornament. You know?

And I've never liked, or in fact even understood, mulled wine, Maybe it's the neurodiversity in me, but I've always felt that some things are meant to be cold and some things are meant to be warm. Wine is a cold drink, or at least a room-temperature drink; hot wine is weird to me. In the same way that I know, objectively, the only difference between a hot chocolate and a chocolate milkshake is the temperature, but a cold 'hot chocolate' irks me as much as a warm milkshake.

I feel this podcast is going to lose me followers. Meh. I could talk about the Israel-Palestine conflict if you'd prefer?

{section separation jingle}

I'm not really one for Christmas traditions. Aside from going to a Wetherspoons pub for a breakfast on the morning of 26th December. I did this more often than you'd expect when I lived in Kirkby-in-Ashfield, with at least two of my friends there at different times, though I wouldn't have called it a tradition of mine then, and

then more recently me and Laura have done it whenever we've been in the same place at Christmas. Wetherspoons are generally open normal hours on Boxing Day; I mean some of them are open on Christmas Day. Generally open normal hours, anyway. /me glares at Deansgate.

Christmases for me growing up weren't terribly notable or unusual. The adults in the family would open their presents late on Christmas Eve, while I as the resident kid would have Christmas morning devoted to opening mine. Christmas dinner, or Christmas lunch, let's be northern, would be early afternoon and involve two different types of meat (usually turkey and ham), lots of vegetables, and finished with a Christmas pudding which in my head always seemed to be somewhere in the ultra-violet wavelengths, topped with holly and a copious amount of alcohol, that was burnt off as it was brought in from the kitchen, giving a soft flame effect. Heading towards my teenage years, fewer people in the house meant less pomp and circumstance, while conversely my uncle had a habit of making his own pate, which involved half the kitchen being placed on top of the dishes to flatten it, for reasons that are beyond me because I've never made pate and probably never will; it seemed an inordinate amount of effort.

With regard to Christmas presents actually, as a family it turns out we're not very much in that space. My uncle and my mother used to have a habit of going 'I bought this for myself and I'm going to pretend it's from you' to each other, but I don't think they even bother doing that now. They did both buy presents for their respective pets, including wrapping them in wrapping paper, and, on that note, not just sending Christmas cards ostensibly *from* their pets, but in fact telling me that some of my presents were from the pets.

My uncle's cat friend requested me on Facebook about eight years ago. I refuse to acknowledge said request.

But these days, I guess because I've spent a large amount of time on my own with my friends scattered across the known world, Christmas isn't really anything special for me. I don't cook anything special just because it's Christmas Day; I just treat it like a quieter Sunday. One year I spent it removing wallpaper from my old house. Because I'm exciting like that. Such a catch, I know.

Amanda tells us that even in Australia, Christmas is a time for family. Except Christmas Eve, apparently.

{AMANDA: But for me, my personal Christmas traditions are that on Christmas Eve I go to karaoke with one of my best friends. We've been doing it nearly a decade and that's just, it wouldn't be Christmas without our Christmas Eve karaoke. And then on Christmas Day I usually go to my mum's house, and also probably see my dad then or the following day if he's around, he's travelling this year so it was just my mums, and we all bring our favourite foods, and we eat lots, we drink a fair bit of wine or whatever we want to drink. One of my very favourite Christmas songs is Tim Minchin's "White Wine in the Sun" and he grew up in Perth as well and it's a very typical, it describes a typical Australian Christmas I think with all the traditions that are really just about being with family.}

One of the family traditions in the UK is to go to a theatre to watch a pantomime. Now, as stated earlier, according to my podcast listening stats, my biggest audience is in the USA, so for the avoidance of doubt I ought to give a very quick overview of what Pantomime is, since it's very definitely a British-centric culture at this time of year. Basically, take a fairy tale or folk tale (think Jack and the Beanstalk, or Aladdin, or the story of London Mayor Dick Whittington), put it on a theatre stage, turn it into primarily a comedy (throwing in a very liberal number of topical or pop-culture jokes and satire), make it camp, no, more camp than that, no, keep going (consider that traditionally the lead actor is a woman playing the part of a man, while there's always comic relief in the Pantomime Dame, which is a man playing the part of, usually, an old woman), encourage a huge amount of audience participation - this is a genre that doesn't just break the fourth wall, it pulls it down with a wrecking ball and uses the rubble to build roads into the watching crowds - and then market it at children but include many not-so-subtle jokes for parents. On that note, it's weird that, although adult-only pantomimes exist, they're generally not very good.

Most towns and cities in the UK will have a pantomime performing through December and touching into January, and the more prestigious theatres will have both television actors (usually soap operas) or comedians, and local celebrities (eg local radio presenters) taking the parts.

All good clean fun. But I think it loses something if you're not watching in a group.

Speaking of children, my mother reminded me of a tradition that still happens today.

{MOTHER: We go to the grottoes, in Liverpool there was always about five or six you'd go to; Father Christmas was always there, sitting on his little throne, with his little helpers. You'd get a, some sort of present from them, you know it was usually just colouring pencils or things like that, or your parents would buy the present and it'd be wrapped up and given to you. That was the go-to thing, always went to the Grotto, and loads of Christmas decorations in the towns, I think they were all celebrating because there was no more war, you know even ten, fifteen years after, there was a lot of bomb damage in Liverpool.}

{section separation jingle}

All this brings us to New Year, Which, at the time of podding, is still to occur.

I was having a discussion today about New Year with some of the people I know on the Tickling Discord Server actually, so it's something that's in my mind. I've never been one for going out at New Year. Partly because I'm an introvert and everywhere outside is going to be rammed and expensive, and I'm simply not going to have a good or pleasurable time, but also because, I guess, for me, New Year isn't actually anything significant. It's like a birthday; it's an arbitrary time we create that defines a period artificially; when you think about it, every day is a new year, as it's exactly a year since the last time that date occurred. May 29th isn't a terribly exciting day, even if I know three people who celebrate their birthday on that day so it's not a day chosen at random, but every 29th May is exactly a year after the previous one. Just because we don't, as a culture, add one to the value of the year on that date, doesn't mean it's any more or less significant than January 1st. I don't need the year to change in order to go out to a pub, as might be evident from this podcast.

Now, New Year House Parties are a different thing, again as we discussed on Discord. I've not done very many of them, because one of the snags of having a friend group that are geographically disparate is that, well, they're geographically disparate. But I've done a few and they're far more pleasant and accessible than going 'out' for New Year. For me it's not specifically a New Year thing; I just like spending time around my friends, in a physical way rather than a virtual way. And it makes a change when I do as it doesn't happen very often.

This seems to have been something my mother traditionally agreed with, too.

{MOTHER: New Year, we always used to have a big party, the family, because, with me dad having a load of sisters, we'd all meet up and have a party, and there was always parties going on around, you know, around the road, neighbours would have them, and all sorts of things.}

I don't have any traditions around New Year. There were several years in the late 2010s where my New Year would be spent at my theoretical ex-girlfriend's house, catsitting, while she went to her dad's house for New Year with her disparate inner family. I had no problem with this, which might tell you all you need to know about my feelings around social interaction.

Obviously I grew up in a culture that definitely does, or at least did, have New Year traditions. Such as First-Footing, where a dark-haired man (and it is always a man) going outside before The Time, and then knocking at the door to be let in after it turned midnight. The idea seeming to be that if the first person you met or came inside was dark-haired you'd have good luck throughout the forthcoming year, and if they were fair-haired, then you would not. Sounds slightly historically-racist to me, if we're being honest. Fortunately my family had one, in the form of my uncle. Wikipedia suggests it's a holdover from being wary of Vikings.

Speaking of my uncle, he being a Morris Dancer means he has a tradition of doing some off-season New Year Dances to welcome in the New Year, at local pubs, obviously. I say off-season; Morris Dancing itself tends to be a summertime thing kicking off with early morning dances up a hill on May Day, but during Winter the same group of people do Mummers Plays. These are more acted out rather than danced, in a very casual and audience-participatory way, where they perform one of a number of traditional types of storyline involving heroes and villains – it's not dissimilar to pantomime, if we're being honest. His troupe tend to go for St George versus the Turkish Knight. Sounds slightly historically-racist to me, if we're being honest. They go from pub to pub performing them, and much beer is drunk.

I asked Amanda about traditions in Australia. She gave me precisely one. See if you can guess what it is.

{AMANDA: And then New Years Eve here is kind of just an extension of having fun, but probably having fun with friends rather than family. There are usually some fireworks to be had round and about the place, but especially the famous ones in Australia are the Sydney Harbour Fireworks, so they have a really huge display

coming off the Sydney Harbour Bridge and coming off the harbour and around the Opera House, and they have the kids version at 9pm which is great I think, and then the midnight ones. Of course here in Perth the midnight ones in Sydney are time-corrected 9pm here, so I kind of like that because I like to get to bed early, but my son usually insists that we stay up until midnight.

Ah but yeh, we don't have any particularly important traditions around New Years', apart from setting a bunch of New Years Resolutions that we will probably break pretty quickly. Other than that, that's New Years, here.}

I've never been one for fireworks. It's literally watching your money blow up in smoke.

Amanda there mentioned resolutions. I've not done that in years. Because ADHD makes the concept rather pointless. What do you mean you have to stick to a routine and consciously do things differently on a regular basis? I'm out.

{end pod jingle}

Well, that's all for this pod. Join me again next year for another adventure beyond the brochure. Until then, remember, if it actually was Christmas every day, nothing would get done, and if you're feeling off colour, keep on getting better.

{Outro voiceover:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice.

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Until next time, have safe journeys. Bye for now.}