

Podcast 100: Festivals

{INTRO:

VIV: VFest was a Bouncy Castle assault course which needed to be sanitised in regular intervals which was quite an experience. Trying to clean a Bouncy Castle is just not an easy job at all, so much hilarity involved in that one as well, and anything to do with catering have to ensure appropriate hot water, hand and dishwashing as well as distancing. So I had to be very very careful for that.}

{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, by the time this podcast episode is dropped, I should have been back from my backpacking trip around South Asia for about four days. However, Past Me knows Future Me all too well, and is fully aware they will not want the hassle of making a podcast immediately upon their return. So, in an uncharacteristic feat of organisation, and because otherwise Laura will complain at me for not being consistent in my content creation schedule, I'm recording this long in advance. So I don't know how the trip will have gone. Hopefully I won't've had my phone nicked again and I'll be able to do a podcast about it pretty soon.

Given I'm writing this almost a month in advance, I also have to assume the world won't have ended in the intervening time. Honestly, I'm only offering Even Money on that one.

So. This podcast is on Festivals, and as we're coming up to the season where people are likely planning their summer, this feels quite pertinent. It was an idea for a pod I had off the back of the episode I did last year on 'travelling for music' - one of my online travel friends gave me a contribution that was all about travelling for a festival and I figured it would make a good topic for a separate episode. It's just taken me this long to fit it into the publishing schedule.

During the mid-90s, my old flatmate Phil introduced me to an indie band called Fatal Charm, who had an album track called 'Festival'. It's been in my head ever since whenever I think of festivals, and especially while writing this episode. It's not even that great a song, but oh god its catchy.

{section separation jingle}

As I say, one of the other popular aspects of travelling for music involves festivals. Now, when most people think of festivals, especially music festivals, what usually comes to mind is a huge 3-day bonanza in a field or park, with several large stages with popular band, lots of people, lots of mud, lots of tents (flooded), and the occasional illicit substance. Some people might also instead think of those beach raves in places like Thailand, which are more or less the same, only with fewer facilities and better weather. Mostly attended by twenty-somethings or thirty-somethings who want to try to relive their youth. It rarely ends well.

Lucy Ruthnam, who blogs at Absolutely Lucy, is an avid festival-goer, and one of the first festivals she went to, she travelled for, and it sounds like it had those kinds of vibes. If a little more on the hippy-side, which is definitely on-brand for her.

{LUCY: So I think I went to my first festival around 15 years ago and absolutely fell in love with them from day one. I'm really lucky that I get to go to festivals as part of my job as a content creator now. And one of my favourites that I ever went to had to be in Envision Festival in Costa Rica. It was my first time doing a festival solo and it was an incredible one, it was part-way between the beach and the jungle. The music was incredible. It was just a bit of a dust bowl. Everything was sweaty and just some incredible like talks and discussions and creative arts, DJs. Everything was just so vibrant and the people there were just amazing. I think the atmosphere really just made it, especially dancing on the beach with all my new friends that I made along the

way. But yeah, it was a really, really magical event. It's definitely one that I recommend to travellers.}

It may surprise you to know I've never been to a festival quite like that. When I was at University, a couple of people I was friendly with went to the Glastonbury Festival, and how they described it made it seem quite cool, but at the time I was absolutely not that kind of person. The best way to think about me is I'm kind of a Benjamin Button type person in my social life - the older I get the younger I feel. Which is awkward. If I was then how I am now I'd definitely have been interested, but these days I feel it's just a bit too expensive to vaguely see bands from a long way away that I'm not necessarily that keen on. I mean, tickets for that 1994 festival (headlined by The Levellers, Elvis Costello, and Peter Gabriel) were £59, which is about £120 in today's money; the 2024 festival ticket cost £355. Make of that what you will. And yes there are more stages now, and the whole thing's at least a day longer, but nah. It's too peopley for my tastes; I'd probably just end up retreating to the quieter hippie sections and [redacted].

That's not to say I've never been to a music festival. I have a few times, it's just the festivals in question have been much more low-key affairs, and two of them were ones catering for a, shall we say, slightly older, crowd.

The first was in September 2010, and was the 'Off The Tracks Summer Festival', held at Donington Park, near East Midlands Airport. It's very much more of a casual folksy festival than a pop festival, often with bands you might not have heard of unless you're into that particular scene. The 2024 edition, at the end of August, had bands like 'Peatbog Faeries', 'The Beat', and 'The Bar-Steward Sons of Val Doonican' amongst others. It probably helps to listen to BBC 6 Music. They also have a performance by local music and dance groups the Nottingham Samba Collective and the Black Pig Morris. Very definitely a place to sit and listen to music drinking real ale. At the time of podding, tickets were still on sale for £110 for the weekend. As opposed to Glastonbury where tickets sold out within an hour of going on sale.

Anyway. Yeh, I went to the 2010 version, because at the time I was living in nearby Nottinghamshire and one of my close geographic friends, Marie, is very much into the folkscene so I went along with a couple of her friends. The thing I recall most was a performance by the Bad Shepherds, a group led by a chap called Adrian Edmondson, yes, that one, the comedian, and their shtick was to play punk songs from the 1970 and 1980s, but on folk instruments. If you can imagine a cover version of the Clash's "London Calling" but played on fiddle, mandolin, and pipes. Because why not. He also raised the crowd with the usual 'Cheer if you're enjoying yourself', 'cheer if you've had a drink', and then 'cheer if you've had a spliff'. After a few raucous bellows from the audience he followed up with 'cheer if your children heard you say that'. It was amusing at the time.

I don't remember much else about the festival, other than the real ale. It was notable for being the first time I'd slept in a tent in a field surrounded by lots of others in that festival-kind of environment, and, I think, in fact only the second time I'd been in a tent - the previous time had been several years previously when a group of us had camped in the New Forest for reasons that escape me at the time. That was bloody freezing and because I was sharing a tent too, I don't think I slept at all. At the festival, even though I was also sharing a tent with others, it felt much more comfortable.

My friend Viv, who I as we'll hear later I *met* at a festival, has something to say about festival facilities, including camping.

{VIV: So the festival experience usually involves camping, so you're in close proximity to other people and you can easily hear people close by. As someone who apparently snores quite loudly I can only apologise to those that have had to listen to me in the past, really really sorry about that but yes. If you're not sure about camping, motor homes are allowed usually, you can get an electric cook up and glamping packages are also available in quite a few these days so you can get a bit more comfort if you want to pay a little bit extra. Otherwise local hotels and B&Bs are also there usually.}

Facilities vary, water points usually plenty around, sharing can be a bit a hit and miss. So the festival essentials usually include things like wet wipes in case you need to clean down in your tent, spare toilet roll and for us ladies maybe even a she-wee and empty fabric conditioner bottle if you know, you know. Toilet facilities, yes, at Glastonbury, I've only actually managed to go to once, the long drops are very well known. Yes, so the spare loo roll definitely worthwhile.}

Certainly the festivals I've been to have had, shall we say, interesting toilets. In those days too I didn't wear dungarees so I've not yet had the, er, 'pleasure', of stripping off to use a festival toilet and hoping my clothes don't get too affected by the portakabin floor. To be honest though, after three or four days camping a field,

without a shower, everyone's pretty 'ripe', and you don't notice it until you're on the way home. Which is fine if you drove there with other campers. Not so much if you have to take a couple of city buses to get home.

Anyway. Two years after the Off The Tracks festival, I went to two festivals in the space of three weekends. I recall exactly when too; the summer of 2012 was dreadful with regard to the weather, one of the wettest years I can remember, and yet I managed to choose two of the driest weekends to camp in. It was also the opening and closing weekends of the London Olympics, but they were something I didn't give much regard for. I went alone to both of them, which probably says something about improving self-confidence.

So, and as an aside, but a relevant one, 2012 was an interesting and arguably seminal year in my personal development, as it was very clearly, and even at the time I acknowledged this, the year I 'became' me. It was the year of my first solo backpacking trip to somewhere I didn't know anyone since my abortive Italy trip ten years previously, and I've talked about that trip to South East Asia on two previous podcasts. It was also the year I first purposely stayed in a backpacker hostel (Jazz Hostel, Ljubljana, in October), and it was the first full year I came to terms with my asexuality, partly prompted by discovering the concept of Quirkyalone, the first time I'd ever come across what I'd later come to realise was a direct challenge to amatonormativity; the idea that it was fine to be single and to be comfortable being alone with friends. This gave me a big fillip to my social confidence, which then allowed me to be more comfortable doing things like barefoot backpacking and going to social events like festivals on my own. A lot of people rave about 2012, but for entirely the wrong reasons; 2012 was a great year for me and one of the best years I've had, but this was entirely for personal reasons. If only it hadn't rained quite so much. There'd been a drought over the winter of 2011/2012 and the reservoirs were running low. When it started raining in March I'd said to my friend Sarah 'this'll help', and she said 'it's the wrong sort of rain, at the wrong time'. When it stopped raining, in October, I did not say anything, but it must be said I was, admittedly slightly evilly, quite smug.

As an aside, one of the downsides of many festivals is the weather. I've been generally lucky with this, as you'll hear, but I did have one weekend volunteering at a festival when the heavens truly opened. I'm always a bit paranoid about sleeping in a tent under the rain, because I can hear it splashing against the cover and I'm always convinced it's going to come inside. It never has. But that weekend was when I learned my tent was waterproof. And that a couple of the other volunteers' tents were no. Tales the next morning over a warm drink on the hay bales when they told us they got flooded and darned near washed away. Nightmare.

"It always rains all day, you'd better take your mac, at the festival" as the song goes.

Anyway. The second of these festivals was again another folksy festival. This was the long-standing Cropredy festival in Oxfordshire, created and maintained by the long-standing English folk-rock band Fairport Convention, who were a mainstay of my childhood as they're a band (and a genre) my uncle is very fond of. Some of what they play is traditional folk songs, while some are newly-written songs but which keep to the same vibe, so it's sometimes hard to tell if what you're listening to is traditional or modern.

Anyway, they try to hold the festival every year and while they themselves take the headline slot on the final night, the lineups on the other days are perhaps surprisingly eclectic and variable. For instance, the year that I went, other leading acts performing included 80s pop act Squeeze, singer-songwriter and icon Joan Armatrading (one of the first and leading Black Lesbians in UK entertainment), and Dennis Locorriere, whose name may not ring a bell but he was the lead singer with 70s rock band 'Dr Hook', who you will heard from. My attendance was at the 45th anniversary celebrations of the Fairport Convention band, and I bought a t-shirt to that end, with 8-bit representations of every band member, most of whom were still alive at the time. They're now almost on their 60th. Maybe folk music makes you immortal (this may explain Bob Dylan and Tom Lehrer), although only if you get over the awkward early experimental stage. And avoid falling down stairs. RIP Sandy Denny.

Cropredy is a bigger festival than Off The Tracks; though there was only one main stage, the field in front of it was huge (and on a slight hill, so even if you were quite a way back you still had a good view of the stage, kind of like a natural stadium, sort of), and camping takes place in several of the surrounding fields. In addition, the festival take over the village, in the sense that you'll be drinking in one of the village pubs (real ale, obviously) and you wouldn't be at all surprised to find you're standing at the bar next to the lead singer of Bellowhead or the guitarist from the Saw Doctors. There were several pubs and all were pretty much full of festival-goers and festival-bands. You'd have to like folk/rock music to live there I guess. Or just get the heck out for the weekend, a bit like how people do in Nottingham for the Goose Fair. Which despite living a short bus ride away from for 15 years, I never went to.

Obviously given the nature of the musicians and the casual vibe of the festival itself, it's quite a calming and family-friendly place, so even though I was there on my own, I didn't feel overwhelmed or anything, and it was easy to strike up casual conversations with other festival-goers.

I remember it being quite dry and sunny, which was a rarity for the summer of 2012, and as the music didn't start until early afternoon I took the opportunity to walk along the canal to the nearby town of Banbury, a place I'd never had the opportunity to visit before. It's not a terribly large place, but it's famous if nothing else for Banbury Cross, as per the old children's rhyme and subsequent folk song 'ride a cock horse to Banbury Cross'. Although it's a different cross, as that one made famous in the rhyme was probably destroyed by Puritans in 1600. Because that's what Puritans did.

One notable thing about the Cropredy Festival, that sets it apart from other festivals, is it is very heavily focussed on music and there wasn't much in the way of extra-curricular activities. Unless you count drinking beer, I guess. The festival I went to two weeks earlier was almost exactly the opposite. Although it also had a real ale bar. Because of course it did.

I don't quite know why I started 2012 looking for festivals online. I don't remember what my mindset was, and I seem to have lost the notebook I was making notes at the time in, which is annoying as it had some early drafts of what would later turn into my never-to-be-completed fantasy adventure novel. But anyway, I was looking at all the ones scheduled to take place in the year, and one caught my eye, for obvious reasons.

I'm always going to be intrigued by an event known as 'Barefoot Festival'. But before you raise an eyebrow, no. This is 'barefoot' in the metaphorical sense, in it being very casual, very low-key, very independent, and just very ... I mean yes, it was also quite hippy, but in a fun, family-friendly way. And it was a very family-friendly festival - children were actively encouraged, but the sort of families who go there seemed to be the sort of families who'd think of nothing of just packing themselves into a camper van and driving cross-country for a month, rather than two weeks in Benidorm or Butlins.

In fact, it was so hippy-family oriented (the sort of place that has a sign warning drivers of, and I quote, 'free-range children'), that I even sent them an e-mail beforehand going 'er, like, I'm a solo male backpacker, am I even welcome here?'. This was, of course, in the days before I realised by non-binary nature, but honestly, the very fact a small family-friendly incredibly-hippie festival in the Leicestershire countryside appealed to me ought to have been a bit of a giveaway, had anyone known what non-binary meant in 2012. And without resorting to a stereotype, I wonder what proportion of kids there at the 2012 Barefoot Festival are now equally as GenderQueer. It's not going to be zero, put it like that.

Anyway.

It was quite easy to get to from my house in Kirkby-in-Ashfield - literally only two local buses, albeit a journey time of about two hours. It was just outside Loughborough, at a place called Prestwold Hall, which itself serves as a wedding venue but it's also near one of those old airfields that's now given over to private flying and low-key motor racing, which at some of the speeds they can go, could also involve flying low. I checked in, wandered to the far end of the camping field, and set my tent up.

Now, it must be remembered this was the first time I'd used this tent; to all intents and purposes it was the first time I'd set up a tent on my own. Because my family tended to prefer, you know, places made of brick or stone. Like normal people. In addition, clearly I never tested out the tent at home before I went, I mean I took it out the bag but my living room wasn't really big enough to put it up properly, so all I had to go on was that all the pieces were there. In the event, I managed to construct it without too much hassle, to the extent I even posed for a selfie in front of it. Listener, in 2012, I did not *do* selfies because of body image and self-confidence issues.

The festival site was spread around a large field; a bit rutted and with a few more thistles than you might expect, so you definitely had to watch a bit where you set your tent up. There were quite a few shops; pop-up tents and small marquees, selling a variety of things like hippie clothing and bags and trinkets. Just off the main drag was another series of marquees that were designated the chillax area, and included people offering massage sessions or running several different kinds of yoga and related activities, like gong baths. There was also a lot to keep children entertained, including a specialist kids art&crafts area with activities like face painting and felt-making scheduled across the whole weekend.

Some of the other tents and marquees were dedicated to workshops, and there was a whole list of them pretty much every hour or two. I seem to not have a copy of the programme any more, but many of the events on offer were dance workshops, where you spent an hour or so learning the basics of various styles of dance. I remember trying six of them, but the only ones that came to mind were Capoeira, the Brazilian crossover martial art which I learned very quickly is absolutely not something that a dyspraxic should ever try, because it's so easy to kick someone in the face if you get it even slightly wrong; Charleston (or Lindy Hop), which is far far too fast-paced for me and is the dance equivalent of running your belly while tapping your head. While skipping. You can easily guess how long I lasted at that. One finger one thumb one arm one leg one nod of the head stand up sit down keep moving is about my limit on that sort of thing. In fact the only dance workshop I went to that I was in any way coherent with, and indeed even enjoyed, was the one on Bollywood. I think because it was well-taught, quite repetitive, and the movements weren't too fast or jerky. It's also ... the teacher pointed out some of the movements are easy to remember if you associate them with different actions. Years before, I worked next to a chap of Indian parents who said that Bollywood was simply looking like you were screwing a lightbulb in while shiftily glancing from side to side to see who was watching. In a way he's kind of right. It's all about the hand movements. And the eyes. A lot of eyes. Which is easier to do than legs, in my experience.

Food & drink were available from several stalls, including a red double-decker routemaster bus that had been converted into a bar selling Pimms and craft beer. There were also places to get wood-fired pizza, toasties, and falafel. The latter also did kebabs but let's just pretend that everything was healthy soul food.

Like the other festivals, music was an integral part, and two of the tents had live bands and singers on for much of the day - mainly local and unsigned acts, rather than people you'll've heard of, although I had seen one in Nottingham when they shared the bill in a pub with the band my friends Marie and Richard used to play in. You also had a roving band of ukulele players who'd go to one of the designated 'busk stops' (a bus stop sign, but, well, for busking) and play a little. Including that traditional folk tune, er, 'Bad Romance'. On the Saturday night though the big top marquee tent was given over to cabaret, or, more specifically, burlesque. You might wonder, but Nel, it's a child-friendly festival, how can they justify burlesque, and my answer is that they do, and why not, and it's fun, and interesting, and stop worrying about it because no-one else is. There was also music around the fire; a large bonfire and fire pit that was kept running most of the night, but one of the nights there was a full fire show, with flame dancing and juggling and other things that, again, I should really have no part in. Don't worry, the show was put on by professionals and it looked incredibly spectacular against the dark sky.

Again it did not rain; I think I picked the only two dry weekends that year to go camping. I'm not complaining about this.

Lucy has been to many festivals like this in the UK over the years, which mix family entertainment, arts, crafts, and music. It's actually likely she'll have been to the same festivals as Viv; when small worlds collide, and all that.

{LUCY: But of course we can't talk about music festivals without talking about the ones in the UK. I love UK festivals and I think we have some of the best ones in the world. I love taking my camper van to festivals each summer. It's a real, real highlight for me. And I'm a big fan of anything that essentially allows me to be covered in glitter in a field and just prancing around, having the time of my life and laughing for a few days. I love to try and go to festivals with friends each summer. And yeah, some of my absolute favourites have been Lost Village Festival up in Lincolnshire, Boomtown Fair, festivals like Wilderness and Secret Garden Party, basically any that are completely immersive and creative and artsy and just vibrant with amazing DJs and music. I really love when people are getting really dressed up and lose themselves in the weekend.}

A similar vibe comes from Fizz, who I know from online, and she talks about a festival in Denmark she travelled to. In fact she volunteered at it, as you'll hear later. What's interesting here though is the style of the festival was slightly unusual compared to what your first thoughts might be when you think of the word 'festival'.

{FIZZ: My favourite ever memory of one is, it was Distortion Festival which takes place in Copenhagen. I was there last year so June 2023, and it was so special because we actually volunteered there. So the way the festival works is this sort of week-long city-wide festival, like it takes place across the city. I mean honestly the city was just descended into chaos for a week, I don't really know how the residents handle it but the schedule is just absolutely packed. There's arts, talks, dance workshops, a lot of family friendly events. At one point they've closed a block of the street for a street party, really really nice. And then at the same time it's kind of just like a city-wide rave which is really chaotic and I don't know quite how they reconcile these two parts of the festival.}

But you could walk down one street and there's face painting and there's sort of like dance acts and stuff like that. And then you could walk down another street and it's just sort of young people filling the street and every 50 metres as you walk down the music from one DJ kind of fades out and you get closer to the next one, so the music's changing as you walk down, it's huge. But for every volunteer shift you did you got a day ticket. So we wanted to hit the final two days because it kind of culminates in two nights at Techno. But we were on a bit of a time crunch because we were studying at the time so naturally we pulled the double shift on the Thursday, got our two tickets and then we went to the festival Friday, Saturday. Because why wouldn't you?}

I've only ever been to one city-centric festival, and surprisingly it wasn't Tramlines, the music and culture festival that takes place every year in Sheffield. No, mine was the Camden Crawl in, I guess it would have been 2012, which I suppose makes that my 'Festival Year'. They don't run it any more, I believe because of resident disapproval, but that was a festival across Camden Town, in London, where a lot of pubs and community centres became places for music, comedy, and arts performances over a long weekend. It was notable in my mind for firstly being the place I first came across the comedian Steven N Allen, one of the few contemporary people from the Ashfield area of Nottinghamshire who's more famous than me, and secondly I went with my friend Debbie from Sheffield and our last port of call was around 11pm to watch a synthpop krautrock band straight out of the 1970s. Loud, pulsating, repetitive bass. And Debbie fell asleep. I'm still not quite sure how she managed that. I'd love to be able to tell you who and where this was, but, again, Past Me didn't think to keep the festival programme.

{section separation jingle}

Me: Hello :) It's time for a mid-episode break. Half time. Seventh Innings Stretch. That sort of thing. Put the kettle on. Grab a snack. Get comfortable. I'm just here to remind you ways in which you can get in touch and help this podcast out. You probably know this already, but in case you don't:

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Now, on with the show.

{section separation jingle}

Of course the word 'festival' doesn't just mean music. There's a whole host of other kinds of festival: cultural, religious, foodie, hyper-local, artsy ... there's pretty much a festival for anything.

Obviously I'm very big on beer. And yes, I've travelled to many a beer festival. I used to be a member of CAMRA, the Campaign For Real Ale, well, in fact I'm still a member but it's one of those subscriptions ADHD me never got round to cancelling. Anyway, they're a pressure group in the UK who really promote the ideals of real ale, of traditionally-stored cask ale that's made in traditional ways, with traditional ingredients, and actively rail against the proliferation of mass-produced lagers. They also produce The Good Beer Guide, a directory of pubs that serve decent beer. These pubs are nominated by the local branch so in large urban areas not every decent pub is listed, whereas in smaller towns and more rural areas, it becomes a godsend in the rolling hills of country pub mediocrity and endless pints of Doom Bar and Landlord. I am a member purely for cheaper entry to the beer festivals they put on - there's several around the country pretty much every weekend, organised by the local branch of the organisation. These festivals take place in a local building - could be anything from a local community centre to an old Victorian swimming pool complex - and, the TL;DR version, many breweries, mainly local ones, turn up with one or more of their beers, and people attending can buy samples (usually half-pints) of as many or as few as they feel they want to.

It's obviously a bit more complicated than that, but the main thing that affects things is the size of the festival. Some of them have 20-30 beers on offer, some over 300. This also affects when they're open - the smaller ones are often only open two days, say the Friday and the Saturday, or the Saturday and the Sunday. Others open on the Thursday and stay open until the beer runs out, or Sunday evening, whichever comes sooner. Some of them have themes; I went to one in, where was it, Keighley I think, where all the breweries present were either from Lancashire or Yorkshire, they called it the 'War Of The Roses', obviously, and they had an optional poll where you could rank the beers (and breweries) to determine which of the two was the overall winner. I seem to recall the answer turned out to be Yorkshire that weekend, but I didn't vote. At the time I lived in Nottinghamshire, so I was fairly indifferent to the rivalry!

The festivals are open to everyone but if you're a CAMRA member you get perks, like free entry, or an amount of free vouchers, or a free glass, or something. How they work varies; there's no standard policy, but typically: you walk in and pay an entry fee. This fee also includes a deposit for a festival beer glass. This is what you use to get the beers (yes, you use the same glass for every beer. It's up to you if you choose to rinse it out between samples). You'll also be given a programme, which lists all the beers available, listed by brewery, and a few brief notes about them - strength, style, and peer-reviewed tasting notes. The venue itself will have long tables of equivalent, behind which are a lot of volunteers, and behind them, a whole series of beer casks, numbered as per in the programme. And you simply tell the volunteer which of the beers you want - though it's only polite to wander up to the tables close to where your beer is. How you pay for the beers is very much specific to the venue, but the two most common are either paying as you buy, as per a normal bar, or, more usually, buying a series of 'tokens' (representing values from 10p up to £1 or more), and then handing over the right number of tokens to the server. The latter has the advantage of meaning the cash is only handled in one place (usually near the entrance), and of course you can buy as many or as few tokens as you like, and keep buying them when you run out. Generally the stronger the beer the more it costs. Little hint though, don't do what me and my friend Paul did once at the Bristol beer festival, which was 'we will not drink anything under 6%'. We lasted two hours. It is true the strongest beers do tend to go sooner than you might expect because people do that sort of thing, but, I mean, that's their problem, not yours. I am not a role model.

These beer festivals take place literally anywhere there's a CAMRA branch, which means if you're an avid beer fan, you can go to all manner of relatively interesting places.. When I lived in Kirkby-in-Ashfield, local CAMRA beer festivals were held at places as diverse as Nottingham and Newark Castles (in huge marquees), the Midland Railway Museum just north of Ripley (where one of the bars was in an old railway carriage), a 15th Century Manor House (Gainsborough Old Hall), and the community centre in South Normanton which is only notable because a) I could walk there (kind of; I did get the bus back!), and b) when I went with my ex-gf Amy, we not only between us sampled over half the beers on offer (it was a small festival, but even so!), but we also won several bottles of beer in the raffle they held while we were there.

One of my real-life drinking buddies is a chap called Peter. He also regularly goes to beer festivals; indeed the last time we met, we were at a small beer festival in a pub in my local town of Halifax. It was entirely dedicated to dark beers and was the scene of my new most expensive beer bought - at £30/pint. I had a third, so £10, but if you think that's expensive, bear in mind it was a) imported from Netherlands, and b) 20%. It was very nice ("Double Fudge" from Brouwerij Kees; thick, textured, fudgy, and sweet) but caveat emptor, quite seriously. Anyway, Peter gave me a few contribs for this pod, including talking about beer festivals he'd been to, and why he goes to them.

{PETER: Why do I go to beer festivals? Well, apart from the beer of course, it's something different to do with my drinking buddies. With a wide selection of beers from many breweries, there's just so much choice at a beer festival, many of which that you just won't routinely see at your normal drinking establishments. I'll quite often still drink brews from breweries that I know and trust, but I will go for a beer that I haven't seen before. I do like to mix it up and try some beers from breweries that I might not normally see or get to try. This means that I will tend to look out for beers from the north, or further north at least, Scotland, the Midlands and down south. I can't remember exactly when I first started going to beer festivals, but the earliest festival glassware and programs I still have are from 2013, but it was certainly a number of years before that. It was likely 2008 or 2009.

The beer festivals I attend are a combination of those organised by CAMRA, the campaign for Real Ale, and some organised by Independent Breweries. Last year I attended Brew York's Birthday Bash, CAMRA York Beer Festival, Leeds International Beer Festival and the Saltaire Beer Festival. This year I've already attended the winter version of the Great British Beer Festival at Rotherham that was a couple of weeks ago and I'm also

booked to attend Brew York's Birthday Bash in late April. All being well I'll also be attending CAMRA York Beer Festival, CAMRA Calderdale Beer Festival and the Saltaire Beer Festival.

Apart from the Great British Beer Festival, all of the beer festivals I attend with my drinking buddies are pretty local and don't take us too long to get to. Some of them take an hour or less and even the longer ones only take 90 minutes, possibly two hours. Most are pretty laid back and there's an outside seating area that we tend to sit in. We almost always have various snacks with us, which people will comment on how prepared we are and how we must have done this before. This of course doesn't stop us from also maybe having food from the food vendors, although it's not unheard of us to stop at a curry house on the way back home, and of course a good local pub or two close to the beer festival.}

Obviously, referring to a previous podcast, 'everywhere is interesting', and it's festivals like this that encourage you to visit places you may otherwise have never intended to visit. Especially if they're close to home - it's the reason I first visited both Melton Mowbray (famous for Pork Pies) and Oakham (it's just a genuinely pretty town), as well as providing a reason to re-visit Lincoln, which is one of those smaller cities that deserves a bit more of a look than people give it. If you like hills. Lincoln also has a back passage called 'Glory Hole'. {pause} What?

I'm not quite sure what the first beer festival I went to was - the infamous Bristol trip was in the early '00s and wasn't the first, and I have several glasses from other festivals from the same period. That said, I've not been to a CAMRA beer festival for quite a while. This is purely because of the rise of micropubs and brewpubs. Back in the day, the best place to find decent beer was to peruse the Good Beer Guide and plot accordingly. These days almost everywhere has a micropub, and even many small towns have a bar owned by a craft brewery that'll have plenty of options - near where I live is Cragg Vale, home to, amongst other things, a brewery called Vocation, who operate several brewtaps in the area including Manchester, Halifax, and Hebden Bridge. Each of those has between ten and thirty beers on tap, not just from them but also other breweries they've got deals with. I've been to CAMRA beer festivals with fewer beers available than the Vocation tap in Manchester. So I'm kind of less inspired. That's not a bad thing, or a good thing I guess, that's just how my attitude to beer has changed. One of the major differences, to be fair, though, is that the beer festivals concentrate on cask beer, while the pubs tend to offer a lot of keg beer. The difference is mainly down to taste and preference, and I covered that in my previous podcasts on beer. And keg beer tends to be more expensive, but that's also a separate issue.

CAMRA also host the Great British Beer Festival. The clue's in the name; it's the largest in the country in terms of both size and beers offered. The 2023 edition (2024's was cancelled for logistic reasons) offered over 700 beers from upwards of 500 breweries. As an aside, the UK is thought to have round 1700 breweries; many of them are very small. I've never been; I've always feared it might just be *too* big, and so much choice leads to indecision paralysis and FOMO. Or something. At least with 30 beers on offer it's much easier to decide. However, Peter has, several times, and here he talks about what makes it just that bit more special than the average beer festival.

{PETER: I've been to the Great British Beer Festival, GBBF as it's known, a number of times. I'd catch the train down, head over to the summer exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts, before heading over to GBBF for the Tuesday evening session. I'd then head back to GBBF for the Wednesday afternoon session, having spent the morning walking along the South Embankment and most likely visiting Tate Modern, before then catching the train back home in the evening.

GBBF is mainly just a really big CAMRA beer festival. However there are some things that you won't tend to see at other CAMRA beer festivals. You'll find the Discovery Bar which gives you information about the brewing process and there are a variety of hops that you can rub together between your fingers and see the difference between the different hop varieties. There's a number of CAMRA stalls, there's a membership booth where you can sign up if you aren't already a CAMRA member, there's the dedicated CAMRA bookshop selling the books that they publish and usually there's a book signing or two for recent releases. Then there's the CAMRA store which sells various beer related items. Think copies of the Good Beer Guide, festival glasses, beer mats, pump clips, things of that nature. There's also a dedicated games area where there's various games of skill requiring hand-to-eye coordination because yes that's just what people who've been drinking all day need. If that doesn't take you fancy there's a number of tombola and raffle type stalls there as well you can win prizes on. Over the years I've won such fabulous prizes as t-shirts, a pack of cardboard beer mats, a small beer tankard and I think I won a bottle of beer one year as well. There's usually a charity stall or two, think RSPB, things like that. There's usually a few snack type food vendors. I certainly remember biltong

and Chocolate. There was also the person selling the Viking drinking horns and the mead which I'm not sure I saw anyone ever buy. There was also a stall selling beer themed t-shirts and things of that nature. They also sold hats. The Thursday session of GBBF is traditionally a silly hat day. There's a stage area where various bands and other acts perform. They also hold things like auctions there as well. There's a couple of food zones where hot food is served. Think burgers, hot dogs, various Asian inspired dishes, things of that nature. As for the beer there's about 15 bars. Some of these are dedicated brewery bars, St Austell, Wells, and Young and a couple of others tended to have some. A dedicated cider and perry bar, a dedicated Czech and German lager bar, a dedicated American bar, a dedicated international bottles and can bar. The other bars tended to have a theme. Quite often they were by region but they were similar to what you'd see at any CAMRA beer festival. Mixed styles from various breweries, all being served on the single bar. Some from hand pumps attached to the actual bar service and some just being dispensed from barrels in racking behind them. Most importantly there was seating. Lots and lots of seating. Essential at any beer festival.}

Unusually, the 2025 edition is in Birmingham. Just in case you need another reason to visit that exciting city. I've been meaning to do a blog post about Birmingham for about 10 years. There's a reason I haven't managed it yet.

{section separation jingle}

I've talked a bit about going to different festivals, but there's a whole different aspect to them I've barely touched on yet - what about travelling to a festival to volunteer at one, rather than just turning up as a paying punter.

Regardless of the size of the festival, from small indie ones like Barefoot to huge enterprises like Glastonbury, volunteers are the lifeblood of a festival - indeed no festival can take place without their help. These are the people who make sure the whole thing works, from setting up before the start and helping to dismantle once everyone else has gone home, to stewarding and, to an extent, security (or at least, health & safety), to staffing reception and helpdesks, to litter-picking, every festival needs a whole team of people to be on-the-ground and making sure everything runs smoothly. Without them, nothing would happen; indeed nothing would be allowed to happen, since without volunteers, it wouldn't be safe to put on any event. It's also true with the beer festivals; it's volunteers who are behind the tables serving you the beer, and it's volunteers who are giving you the beer tokens and collecting your cash.

Generally it's a compromise; volunteers get free or discounted entry to the festival, often a separate area where they can set up camp (and sometimes this is closer to the main area of the festival), and fewer restrictions on what they can do or bring, in return for being on-shift for a couple of hours each day which means they're working rather than enjoying the festival and therefore potentially could miss out on seeing some of the live acts, performances, or workshops that may only take place once over the festivities. Additionally, for those of you who find this important, you're not allowed to drink alcohol on shift, which is fine if you're picking litter between 11am and 2pm, but possibly could be a problem if you're responsible for looking after the camp fire at 11pm and making sure none of the punters fall into it because they've been drinking.

I'll talk about my experiences at volunteering in a moment, but first here's Viv again, talking about how she feels about volunteering at festivals, and when she started getting involved with them. In fact, that's how we met.

{VIV: I rarely go to festivals as a punter but more often volunteering in some capacity. Volunteering is a great way in as you can work a number of shifts which are usually three to four hours per day so not a great deal and then get the rest of the festival to yourself. You may also get a food allowance at some so you get your meals included for when you're working, depending on the festival, not always. In some cases you may be expected to pay a deposit which is refundable once you've completed your shifts, not always. If there's bands that you particularly want to see you can usually arrange your shifts around that to fit that in as well. If you go as a solo there's plenty of people to get to know from the crew that you work with. And it's great if you go to the same festivals repeatedly as there are regulars that you'll see and get to know.}

My first real festival was the Green Gathering in Chepstow in 2019 in which I was volunteering for an organisation called Food for a Future or FAF. FAF were formed as a spinoff from Veggies catering campaign. Veggies have been going for more than 40 years, they're one of the oldest vegan caterers in the UK also acting as a campaign group which is how they formed and involved in many animal welfare campaigns. Veggies are based at the Sumac Centre in Nottingham for anyone that's local to the area and are a not-for-profit organisation, very well known in the festival circuit. They're regulars at Glastonbury and certain other festivals.

So FAF's role is outreach which is done via Cookery demonstrations. So my first festival experience was the Green Gathering doing Cookery demos in front of a tent full of people showing how easy it is to cook vegan food. Cooking over a couple of gas burners and a tent in a field can really test your Cookery skills.}

I've only ever volunteered at one festival, but strangely, I've done so four times (2013, 2014, 2016, and 2021). You may be unsurprised to hear it was the Barefoot Festival I mentioned earlier. My reasoning was thus: it was a fun festival but not one that someone of my demographic would necessarily want to keep going to as a punter. I appreciated that it was there and I loved the vibe, but felt if I were to go again, I'd have to have a reason to. And volunteering seemed like the perfect reason to. The average attendee was unlikely to cause too much trouble, the people who run it felt friendly and approachable and, I think most importantly, genuine, and I felt it was also something I **could** do, in the sense that bigger festivals might involve more responsibility and was I ready for that at this stage. About the worst thing that could happen was a fight between a pigeon and a five-year-old. Actually, that's a lie - given the preponderance of hay bales for seating, the **worst** that could happen would be a huge grass fire, but we were trained for that. Indeed at Barefoot Festival, one of the volunteers was designated as the Fire Marshall, though to be fair this was invariably one of the fire show troupe that turned up every year to perform.

They've all been very similar experiences, though not gonna lie, I was much more angsty about the first time than the last time. I was filling in the form to apply feeling no end of imposter syndrome; after all I'd never done anything like that before. The nearest I'd got was doing stuff at the University Student Union, taking prospective students on campus tours and staffing the Open Days - and that had been nearly twenty years previously. So when I turned up I felt quite like a fish out of water, but honestly, it was lovely. I don't know if it was something particular to that festival or if all organisers are like that, but I felt very welcomed and definitely 'part of the team'. I think that's something important if you're going to do something like volunteer at a festival - sure there's going to be times when it's not all funky and rosy, but if you're in an environment that feels comforting and welcoming, even when things go wrong, it doesn't feel like the end of the world. In all my times volunteering, I don't think I can remember an argument even; we all just did what we needed to and it all worked out fine.

Jobs I've ended up doing over the years at Barefoot Festival have included putting down and picking up the signposts and quirky info boards, both on the surrounding roads and within the festival site; helping to deconstruct a marquee tent (with help from the aforementioned Viv; at least **one** of us isn't dyspraxic); emptying on-site bins and moving heavy binbags from one end of the site to the skips at the other (wheelbarrows provided, even if it did have a bit of a life of its own); guiding cars and campers to the correct places ('brain the size of a planet, and they have me parking cars'), and telling people 'you can't park here'; and welcoming people to the festival in the first place, checking tickets, selling tickets where necessary, and giving brief introduction information. This was arguably the best of the roles as it's the only one that a) involved sitting down, and b) had shelter. Though, perhaps surprisingly, we only had excessive rain one year. Most of the time it was dry, not necessarily sunny, though given the landowners didn't often trim the grass, that caused its own problems with thistles and dry grass. You don't have to be barefoot at the Barefoot Festival, as I say it's metaphorical, but I generally was and sometimes that was a bad idea.

The festival tended to last 3 days, and aside from setting up the day before and dismantling the day after, I'd be on shift for 4 hours each of the days. And these shifts varied, so you weren't always doing the same things every day - although obviously car park attending would be more prescient on the first day, with general marshalling more standard on the others. While on shift I had to wear a hi-viz jacket and make myself obviously present and noticeable, though in those days my hair was naturally brown-ish. We also had festival t-shirts that made us more identifiable; the design changed every year and that years' t-shirts (and hoodies) were put on general sale after the event, so it was quite common to see returning attendees wearing the design of the previous years' volunteers t-shirt. Surprisingly this didn't get confusing. Regardless of what shift we were doing, we had to turn up just before at the reception tent where all the admin took place and where the organisers generally hung out. Every so often we'd be treated with a free burger or hot-dog at a barbecue they'd set up. There was a staff rota issued beforehand, which had a limited amount of flexibility for swapping shifts, and, unless you were on general marshalling duties (which basically involved wandering around both the festival area and the camping field wielding a litter picker and a CB radio), you'd be put on shift with someone else, so there'd be two of you to wile away the hours with. Especially useful if you were helping park cars and one of you needed to run off to tell someone 'no, turn left, LEFT'.

It was actually really fun, in general, and obviously I must have liked it enough to keep doing it!

I mentioned earlier that Fizz had volunteered at the festival she went to in Denmark, so here she is talking about that in more detail.

{FIZZ: And I volunteer at events quite a lot. I've been to a few different events as a volunteer and what always surprises me is how much the organisers just want you to have a good time. Which I guess you could say is like the minimum they could do in return of you giving your time and effort. But for me I know what I'm signing up for, I'm probably getting something out of it otherwise I wouldn't have signed up for it in the first place, either just being there is good for me or some perk.

So I'm quite happy to work pretty hard, but I'm always caught off guard by how firstly not gruelling the work is because I guess if it was really difficult it would be a paid role And then yeah secondly how much you get looked after. And this was no different here, so our first shift was from nine to five and our second shift was from six till two. And I'm still surprised at how little convincing I needed honestly to do this idea. But it was fine. We spent most of the day just marshalling a closed road which had been closed for the festival just making sure no one went down. And then in the evening we were runners which again quite easy jobs mostly just distributing food and making sure the crews got fed. I went around kind of relieving other volunteers for a couple of hours so they could go and take their breaks. So I ended up chatting to a lot of people in different roles which was really nice. And it only really got tricky at the very end, so the last couple of hours it was midnight till 2am we were tired and that's when we had to start taking down some of the festival structures because the place they were would have needed opening up. And that's when it got really tiring it was like heavy lifting and yeah really difficult. But before I knew it that was over and we were tucked up in our hostel bed and looking back for the weekend I got out of it, that was really not a lot of work if I'm honest.

So then yeah it was the next day. We chilled out. We went to the festival. We had our two free tickets. For each day that you volunteered you also got four or something like four sort of drinks tokens. I think they went towards food as well. You got to use the volunteer entrance. You got access to a crew area which was a lot quieter so a nice place to go and relax, if you just needed a break, it had a separate bar, a separate loos. So again skipping all the queues really. And then because we'd done those two shifts we'd met quite a few of the volunteers so by the time we actually got to the festival we had a few familiar faces around us so a few people to go and find and party with. And then everyone else at the festival was also just really nice and friendly. It was just a really good atmosphere and it wasn't a small local festival right, there were some huge names. There were four or five stages. And I just had an absolutely fantastic time. And it's just such a nice standout memory. I'm still in contact with some of the people I met there which is amazing and I've seen them since. So yeah, a really nice memory.

It's a really nice way of getting to an event for a little bit cheaper and just a really fantastic way of meeting people as well.}

I'll end this pod with another contribution from Viv. Here she talks about the reality of festivals, and one of the related problems in volunteering, but also ends on a positive note.

{VIV: Whilst volunteering is great and festivals do rely on volunteers they also need the share of paying punters as well. Sadly quite a few festivals have disappeared over the last couple of years due to the financial crisis and Covid. Festival tickets aren't cheap and nothing is these days but there are ways to manage the costs. Most festivals offer early bird deals so batches of tickets are sold at cheaper prices to encourage people to buy the tickets earlier. It's beneficial for the festivals to get early commitment from people, as people often leave it to the last minute; it puts more pressure on the festival who need to know they have enough sales to make it worthwhile. Up front costs need to be supported as well as booking bands. You can also usually have payment plans to split the cost over several payments to make it easier as well.

Whilst they seem expensive they actually run over several days usually and have a number of different bands to see so based on price per gig it's actually really good value and it's really good to see a number of your favourite bands all in one place, so I would definitely recommend. You see some really good artisan traders that go around the festival circuit as well and food vendors that you get to know as well so plenty on offer.}

Honestly, sometimes I feel festival ticket prices are overpriced, and for the big festivals, the chances of actually even getting a ticket is a fraught adventure in and of itself, so volunteering seems like a good way to get to go, even if you don't get a chance to see and do everything. What I will say though is there's no point in trying to volunteer at one of the big festivals straight off the bat - they'll want to see and know that you've had some kind of experience before, and that's definitely better time-served at the smaller festivals who, let's be honest, are

probably more in need of volunteers anyway.

{end pod jingle}

Well, that's about all for this episode. Join me next time for another adventure Beyond The Brochure. Until then, don't miss seeing your favourite band because you're busy juggling with sand. *{pause}* It really is a very niche, obscure song. Anyway. 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, tell your friends that I rocked your socks. If you wear socks when listening to my pod; that's your call not mine. And don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice.

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Show-notes are available on my website: barefoot-backpacker.com.

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