Travel is good but home can be best

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Opinion



I write a lot about the importance of pubs within communities, but the truth is that most of my visits to one are made alone. That’s not to say that I don’t enjoy going to the pub with a group. My favourite times are heading out as a family; we’ve had some cracking afternoons down the local with my young daughter recently, watching England’s various women’s sports teams doing what they do best. But with a new book out (available from the CAMRA shop, of course), I have regularly been out and about recently, travelling solo, to promote it. Going to a new town or city and finding out what epic bars are on offer there is one of my tiny joys in life. I make a point of researching where is likely to offer the best quality and ask where the locals recommend. I’ve come to realise that I do not have a specific “type” of pub that I seek out. Rather, I revel in how unique each one is. Vive la difference, say I! Sometimes, you get the opportunity to visit a real classic. I was in Newcastle-upon-Tyne last week – somewhere I haven’t visited since I was a kid. A trip to the Free Trade Inn was non-negotiable. I’m pleased to report that it was everything I had hoped for. The view over Newcastle, punctuated by the serpentine trail of the River Tyne was truly breathtaking as the city lit up the clear evening’s autumnal sky. The pub itself was warm, nostalgic and welcoming, filled with the hubbub of conversation and occasional yip of an excitable canine. I indulged in two thirds of the Kernel’s London Brick Red Rye Ale on cask. The whole experience was so wonderful that I couldn’t tear myself away, so I opted next for a glass of near-neighbours Donzoko’s beautifully golden Festbier. An excuse to soak up the atmosphere for just a little longer. On other occasions, I wind up in a place that comes on to my radar by recommendation. Beerfly in Bedford is one such venue. It first came to my attention when I compiled a list of the best bottle shops in the country for a piece I was writing in Ferment magazine a few years back. Beerfly received several enthusiastic recommendations, which secured its place on the list. Thanks to a timely reminder from a BlueSky pal, this week I actually set foot through the Beerfly doors for the first time. It could, perhaps, not be more different from the Free Trade. A relatively young micropub and off licence, the decor is stark yet somehow still cosy thanks to the light touches of jovial, cartoonish artwork on the walls and, of course, the luminescent rainbow glow from the bank of can fridges along one wall. I was put immediately at ease by co-owner, Caroline, and was soon ensconced on a metal stool by the green-tiled bar, passing the time with her and another staff member, who’d opted to hang around despite being off-duty. Another two thirds here, this time of the keg sour Comb Your Hair and Be Polite from Sureshot Brewing X Bundobust. I was rather settled and so became quickly saddened that on a quiet Wednesday evening Beerfly closes at 9pm, so I had no time for an encore. Must remember to pay more attention to opening hours in future. Then there are taprooms, and a visit to Worcester a few months ago afforded me the luxury of spending a few hours at the Copper Beech brewery site. This is a brewery I have admired almost since their inception, thanks to the absolute precision with which they deliver the many styles of beer they choose to brew. The taproom absolutely took my breath away. Nestled in what was once apparently the police lost property store, there is a strong industrial vibe. Think exposed brickwork and concrete floors. However, the finishing touches – lighting, furniture and accessories – are so elegantly executed that it feels incredibly upmarket. Here too, I was able to strike up conversation with a group of regulars who were enjoying the sunshine out on what could be described as the beer patio but is more properly termed “the trestles on the street”. For all that, you couldn’t ask for a more convivial place. In some places, there’s nothing more wonderful than settling into an easy chinwag (usually about beer) with the other punters. Quite often though I am happy to take a seat and just watch the world go by, lost in my own thoughts and enjoying whatever beer I have happened across. These times of reflection and observation, though I experience them alone, only reinforce my love for the community that pubs bring. I watch the happiness that a pub visit brings to so many, in a scenario being simultaneously played out against different backdrops up and down the country. Seeing the camaraderie, particularly between long-time customers, reinforces what an integral and vital part of the British social experience the pub represents. I have seen shift workers in Bristol engaged in a lunchtime game of shut the box before they head home to sleep. Watched with interest in Bedford as a small group of enthusiasts collate the scores from their latest bottle share on an ancient laptop, huddled around small glasses covered with plastic lids to trap the aromas as they have done for years. And of course, I’ve been made to feel like I belong by no small number of gentle-tempered pub dogs. Travelling the country and sampling pubs the length and breadth of the land is a gift and a privilege. But I always return knowing that there’s no pub quite as good as the one where you are surrounded by friends.