



FAN BOY

The Smiths outside Manchester's Salford Lads Club in 1985, during their Queen Is Dead sessions. The author, below, paying homage.



DREAM DESTINATION

Owning up to the (really dorky, slightly soggy) trip of a lifetime

BY CHRIS LaMORTE

Last April, when I told people I was going to vacation in Manchester, England, no one here really understood why. ■ “Manchester?” they’d ask, almost alarmed. It was if I had just said, “I’m doing spring break in Takrit this year.” ■ “What’s in Manchester?” Really. They wanted to know. ■ Jeez. Paris in April, no one questions it. Bring a date. But Manchester in April? Bring a raincoat. ■ Well, I had my reasons for going. Never you mind. You can just, as the British say, sod off. ■ But, as I sat virtually alone in the darkened cabin of Virgin Atlantic’s premium economy, I began to question the wisdom of the trip. I was planning to go to a fan convention focused on Morrissey, of the 80s band the Smiths. ■ Yes, that’s right. A fan convention. How embarrassing is that to say? Makes you think of Star Trek geeks playing dress up. Okay, they do dress up as Morrissey at these fan things, too.

Not everyone, of course. Just the singer of the tribute band...and one guy from Germany. But I was told he is known as Morrissey of Nuremburg, so I assume he dresses like that all the time.

What I was really doing on this trip was letting my 45-year-old body live out my 17-year-old self’s fantasy.

What I knew about the place was mostly informed by Morrissey lyrics. During his career, he lyricized it as a humdrum town filled with young toughs, brutalized students, bedsit despair, lead-colored rivers, seething working-class anger, and “streets of wet black holes.”

Well, naturally, I wanted to go this mystical land. Morrissey’s Manchester seemed grim but also more romantic than Chicago Heights and Glenwood.

So for 28 years, dreary, puddle-filled Manchester was my dream trip.

Naturally, when I arrived it was warm, pleasant and sunny. Strangers waved to me. I actually got a tan just walking around the first day. “Hashtag Tanchester,” the hotel clerk chirped when I checked in after a day of exploring the city.

Where were the fellow depressives in wet socks?

What I found was a city not unlike Chicago, a place that’s pivoted away from its industrial, gritty past and toward chic cafes, high-brow mixology bars, and burger joints — seriously, everywhere you look, burger joints.

But still all the natives had the same question.

“Well, why’d you want to come here?” They were as confused as Chicagoans were. Genuinely. I didn’t want to admit that I was a nerd here for a Smiths convention. Or that I would be taking a yellow tour bus that trailed famous sites like Salford Lad’s Club (which is basically Abbey Road for Smiths fans). I would pose for pictures there, buy souvenirs, and, yes, be an all-around dork.

So I told people I just came for their glorious weather.

The day of the Smiths convention it rained. Drizzle, but it was enough. Most everyone else there was fairly local, except Nuremburg Morrissey, who told me he wasn’t interested in seeing the Smiths cover band scheduled to play that night. “I don’t like cover bands,” said the Teutonic lookalike.

Anyway, everyone had a question for me.

“You came all the way here for this?” At one point, I sat being drizzled upon in the back patio, and a group came out to gawk. “Yeah, this is him. Came from America. Just. For. This.”

I take it back. Maybe Tikrit would have been less shocking to people.

Before I left town, there was one posh place I had heard about that I wanted to see — the Midland Hotel, a Victorian architectural jewel. I sat at the bar drinking a very precisely made gin-and-tonic. When the bartender learned I was from Chicago, she asked, “But why did you come to Manchester?”

I somewhat sheepishly admitted the whole story — fandom, adolescent dream trip, etc. etc. “It’s weird, I know.”

“Hey,” she said. “We love what we love.”

Cheers to that. ■