

Beatles trip of a lifetime

By Tim Smith

There are life-changing moments in everyone's life. High school and college graduation. Marriage. Birth of a child. Major career achievements. I've enjoyed all of the above.

Yet one always unattainable goal was to travel to England and really see and experience the mystery and allure of the Beatles. Since I was a boy in first grade, those four guys have been with me. They were always around and so was the music they created.

Most serious music fans of a certain age already know about all that. But still, nothing can compare with going to the places and discovering John, Paul, George and Ringo all over again.

That's why I signed up for the Beatles Pilgrimage Tour. And following is a recap of the week of thrilling joy ride that it turned out to be. Of course, some of the chronology might be slightly off-kilter. Each of the members on the tour might have put more – or less -- emphasis on other things and places than I did.

But no apologies are necessary. Even for someone in his sixties, checking in with all things Fab in London, Liverpool and points in between was as thrilling as going on college spring break 40-plus years earlier.

It began with an all-night flight Oct. 3-4 from Detroit Metropolitan Airport to London's Heathrow Airport. What unfolded after that was an unbelievable eye opener.

Friday, Oct. 4 – The plane touched down at Heathrow. England is five hours ahead of Detroit time, so it was roughly 7 a.m. and a long, full day of seeing the sights of London and avoiding sleep – to ward off jet lag – began.

First, however, I had to go through British customs. From there, it was over to the ATM to take out 100 pounds to add to my neck wallet (worn under the clothes, to keep pickpockets at bay). Then, it was to the Heathrow Express for the half-hour trek to Paddington Station. From there, it was to a taxi for a short drive to the London Premier Inn Victoria. The cabbie was very personable and talked about going through the Detroit-Windsor tunnel in the 1970s during an extended North American junket. We drove past Hyde Park, one of the places on my to-do list.

Once at the hotel, I stowed my luggage away because check-in wasn't until mid-afternoon. I then sat in the lounge and drank a hot cup of Americano coffee (don't know how they made it, but it was okay).

With my cell phone and battery pack at the ready, I headed out on my Day 1 adventure. Because the Beatles Pilgrimage Tour didn't officially begin until 6 p.m. the following day, I had a day and a half to explore London on my own.

Travel agent Cheryl Ogle of Hey, Wanna Go convinced me in late October 2018 – when I first contacted her about doing the Beatles tour – that I must get there early to see landmarks such as Buckingham Palace, Westminster Abbey, Big Ben and much more. I also wanted to see the Churchill War Rooms and the River Thames. All of those attractions were within walking distance of the hotel.

It was an overcast day with a chance of rain, so I also took my umbrella. I estimate I walked a good 10 miles that day, with several trips on the “tube” later in the day when my feet were absolutely killing me.

I walked around Big Ben and the Thames, circled Parliament and ducked into the “queue” outside Churchill War Rooms. Because nobody was moving toward the entrance I left the line and started toward the mall that would take me to Buckingham Palace. I planned on returning later in the day to see the place where Sir Winston Churchill hunkered down to make so many crucial decisions during World War II.

By the time I did return, I had checked out Trafalgar Square, enjoyed lunch and made it over to Hyde Park. The album cover for Beatles For Sale was taken there in 1964. Hyde Park was a city oasis not unlike New York’s Central Park. But I must have walked five miles on those grounds alone, trying to find a restroom (called a toilet, loo or Water Closet in England). Then it was to the tube to make it back to the Churchill War Rooms for a self-guided tour, and then back to the hotel where I finally checked in.

After dinner in the hotel restaurant, I went up to my room and unpacked to the best of my ability, turned on a TV set that had very few channels and finally had the chance to rest up.

The next day I would need to be up and at ‘em early – I had to get to Paddington around 9 a.m. for my planned excursion to Henley on Thames, and the legendary estate of ex-Beatle George Harrison.

Saturday, Oct. 5 “SOMEWHERE IN ENGLAND”

After a light breakfast it was time to finally go to one of the places I most wanted to see on this trip – Friar Park. I was one train ride and 2-mile walk away from visiting George Harrison’s mansion, the place where much of his solo music was recorded and where the cover photo for All Things Must Pass was taken.

Of course, nobody gets past the front gates at Friar Park, but I wanted to simply reach inside and touch a leaf. I wanted to see how far I could look through the wrought iron fencing. The lower lodge gatehouse was off to the left of the driveway, complete with some strange and wonderful design flourishes – very much the kind of thing that harkened back to the days when eccentric Sir Frankie Crisp lived there. George Harrison and his first wife, Pattie, moved into Friar Park in 1970, saving the structure from the wrecking ball. It definitely was worth the extra effort to make it out to the suburbs of London (Henley is about 40 miles north of England).

But I must say my first view of the place came out of nowhere. I left the Henley train station and – with my cell phone GPS as a guide – traversed the village streets and continued walking in what I hoped was the right direction. Worst case scenario: I might get lost and miss my 3 p.m. train back to Paddington, and thus not make the 6:15 meet and greet for the Beatles Pilgrimage Tour.

But everything went smoothly. I walked down this road, and saw a work crew at the end of it. There was a school off to the right, and wondered what was going on. But then, I turned the corner past the crew and there it was – the famed entrance to Friar Park. I had seen photos and videos, of course, and knew what it would look like. But actually seeing it in person was breathtaking – not to mention the fact my first glimpse of it came so suddenly.

From there, I walked down Gravel Hill Road (a perimeter street) and headed toward the Friar Park mid-lodge. I had watched a You Tube video taken by a Friar Park expert, who walked the perimeter, and that gave me the idea to do the same. Once at the mid-lodge, I again looked through the fence and checked out the place where it is rumored musicians such as Klaus Voorman stayed as guests of the Harrisons.

A security guard scooted up to me from the other side of the fence and said he saw me taking photos, and I told him why I was there. That I was a big fan of solo George and Dhani, and would be back there again Tuesday with the tour group. But the group visit, I knew, would be a photo opportunity and not much more with only 45 minutes allotted to folks to get off and on the bus.

Finally, my dream of getting to Friar Park was realized. It was like having an out-of-body experience. But with a few hours left to kill before getting back on the train, it was time to go to the 1600s-era British pub, the Row Barge, for lunch and a pint.

The Row Barge was one of Harrison's favorite places to visit, located just a block or two away from the Friar Park gates. A song (Soft Hearted Hana) from his eponymous 1979 album famously featured noisy pub banter recorded during such a visit.

Once inside the pub, the bartender and two customers were as friendly as could be. They were watching world cup rugby on a flat-screen TV. Back in the day, a dart board was on that same wall – and George Harrison would come into the pub and throw darts at it.

As for lunch, it was a Chicken and Guinness pot pie. Delicious. I also savored a pint of British ale.

For kicks, I left the pub and returned to Friar Park – only this time with my video rolling. I wanted to document the short walk down the street, showing how quickly Friar Park comes into view.

Next was the return walk to the train station. I stopped in to the New News (yes, that's correct) and picked up a copy of the Henley Standard as a memento.

With the afternoon unfolding, I rode the train on a three-stop leg to Twyford -- where I then changed platforms for the ride to Paddington. After getting back to Paddington, I made the short walk across the station to the subway – and took it back to Victoria Station, only a couple blocks from the hotel.

I had about an hour or so to relax before heading down to meet the rest of the Beatles pilgrims who would be my mates for a week of unforgettable sights, sounds and shared experiences.

Downstairs at the lobby, I finally got to say hello to Tony Maddalone and Sue Hibbs (who I had exchanged e-mails throughout the year as I planned for the trip), received my name badge and met other lifelong Beatles fans just as thrilled to be there as I was.

We walked to a nearby restaurant for our kick-off dinner. I sat at the table with Jerry (one of the tour's biggest Ringo fans and a drummer in his own right) and his wife Cindy. Also helping to break the ice were Marsha and Jessica, a mom-daughter duo from Bowling Green, Ohio (just 100 miles south of where I live).

After a couple hours there, it was time to say goodnight. The following day would be even bigger, believe it or not. I would be walking across the fabled Abbey Road!

SUNDAY, OCT. 6 – ON TO ABBEY ROAD!

Seeing Friar Park ticked off one huge box on my personal bucket list, but without The Beatles there never would have been solo George Harrison so the next Big Thing was much, much bigger for various reasons.

The idea of literally following in the Fabs' footsteps – yes, the Abbey Road zebra crossing – is arguably the top want for serious Beatles fans. And thanks to the excellent Beatles Pilgrimage Tour the wish was finally to become reality.

That would happen sometime during a planned coach tour of central London, which began around 9 a.m. outside the Premier Inn Victoria. Also on the docket was a coveted visit to 3 Savile Row. The former Apple Headquarters was where the Beatles recorded in the basement – having briefly taken their sessions from what then was called EMI Studios.

It also was the site where the group performed its legendary rooftop concert Jan. 30, 1969.

Unfortunately, I woke up in the middle of the night feeling quite ill. That uneasy, sick feeling lingered to the point where I didn't know if I could go through the paces like a proud Beatles soldier. But, of course, I knew THIS was the day I had long waited for. As long as I was standing and breathing, I would go on the bus.

With the day's guide (Colin) giving us the blow-by-blow details, we went all over the London map, seeing many of the places where Swinging Sixties magic happened. And not just concerning the Beatles. We saw the red phone box which David Bowie was photographed for his famed Ziggy Stardust album cover. There were multiple references to the Rolling Stones, Queen, Elton John and Jimi Hendrix along the way.

Soho was a very cool district to visit, with Paul's MPL headquarters and renowned Trident Studios (now closed) among sites clustered within it. Trident was a famous studio used by the Beatles during the White Album (along with EMI Studios) and later was where sessions were held for solo singles such as Instant Karma and My Sweet Lord.

One prevailing thought about Trident was how tiny it seemed. How could such famous, world-turning music have been created in this dingy-looking building? Well, somehow it was.

On to more stops. There was a home at 34 Montagu Square, where John and Yoko lived during 1968. There was a chance to check out the one-time Decca Records studios, site of the Beatles so-called "failed audition" on New Year's Day 1962. For the latter two spots, I stayed on the bus, conserving energy for Abbey Road.

Soon the bus stopped again and Colin urged everyone to get out. At first I thought about staying behind, but then I decided to follow the rest of the group. I was so glad I did, because the next location was the aforementioned 3 Savile Row, right up there on the Mount Rushmore of important Beatles destinations.

There was a nice segment of the Beatles Anthology, showing John, Paul and George separately making their way into the building ahead of the rooftop gig. Those tunnels and the front door look the same as in 1969. Although it now is an Abercrombie & Fitch, one couldn't help but be transported back more than 50 years.

Standing on the ground and looking up toward the chimneys, I channeled those London business types who in early 1969 did the same as the echoes of Get Back and Don't Let Me Down shook a city street.

Still less than 100 percent, I mustered a warm smile as I snapped a selfie near the entrance, and then returned to the coach for more famous locations – each one made more compelling with Colin's sharp, witty and thorough presentation.

There were several group meals included with the tour price, and next up was one of them: lunch at The Railway, where I had pre-ordered a traditional Sunday roast.

It was there that the tour group picked up another member, namely Tony Bramwell, a lifelong friend of the Beatles from Liverpool who had a key role making group promotional films such as Penny Lane and later working as an executive at Apple Records.

The first sight of Tony was quite interesting. He was standing in the pub doorway, smoking a cigarette. He wore red shoes, pinstriped pants and a plaid-like jacket.

Since all the Beatles famously were heavy smokers during the 1960s, it was fitting that Bramwell still showed a fondness for ciggies. Just another callback to a long-ago time, when four guys named John, Paul, George and Ringo ruled the world.

Tony spoke a bit to the group during lunch, but I was more interested in keeping it together to ensure my Abbey Road visit wouldn't be disastrous. I barely touched the food.

I kept asking myself "When will they get to Abbey Road?" There was the threat of rain pretty much since the morning, and my prevailing thought was that the deluge probably would begin just as they made it there. You know, Murphy's Law.

Well, the travel gods were with us. Here comes the sun indeed, with skies brightening profoundly just as the bus rolled closer to the legendary zebra crossing.

And when Colin announced Abbey Road studios were off across the street, with the bus finally stopping, I found a new surge of energy as I bounced down the steps onto the pavement.

Everybody walked the famous walk, with Tony, Sue and tour assistant Mike Phelps all helping orchestrate efforts to take our photos. As traffic came to a stop, they jumped out parallel to the actual zebra crossing and photographed the "pilgrims" as they took their long-anticipated steps.

I was able to cross Abbey Road a second time, this time pointing my phone toward the street and taking video to forever capture an "as it happened" moment for posterity.

Not feeling the least bit sick, I then wrote a "Thanks for The Music" inscription on the graffiti wall (between the street and studio parking lot) and then visited the Abbey Road Store for souvenirs connected with the 50th anniversary of the Abbey Road album's release.

We also stopped by a nearby home purchased by Paul McCartney in 1965, a relatively modest residence in which he still uses when in London. It was very interesting and great to see.

But to be honest with you, the rest of the day was anticlimactic. Happy to finally be back at the hotel, I went straight to bed while others fancied dinner plans.

Abbey Road got me through Day 1 of the tour, but I still needed a full night's sleep. Although there would be nothing quite like that experience on Day 2, it still promised a plethora of Fab locales.

MONDAY, OCT. 7 – JUST LIKE THE MOVIES

One of the best things about taking the Beatles Pilgrimage Tour is leaving all the driving and details to others. All one needs to do is sit back and take it all in, without stress or anxiety trying to find the Fab hot spots. Taking a guided tour is the only way to do it right.

With Friar Park, 3 Savile Row and Abbey Road already in the memory bank, the rest of the week promised to be like free money. Whatever was in store would only augment an already great time, and Day 2 of the guided London tour certainly delivered on that theme.

Much of the day revolved around many of the iconic places where the Beatles filmed promotional films (pre-MTV, after all) and movies "A Hard Day's Night" and "Help."

It helped to have Tony Bramwell along for another day, and he was loads of fun – especially as he rolled his licorice cigarettes while cracking jokes and playfully interacting with the tour group.

Yes, we all saw the actual row of four houses featured in Help... you know, the scene where John, Paul, George and Ringo exited separate doors. Then it was down to the banks of the River Thames, where Colin and company escorted us all to see film locales from A Hard Day's Night, including the Turk's Head Pub. In that pub, there were scenes filmed for both of the movies.

But before reaching the pub, the bus took us to Chiswick House and Gardens, famous for the Beatles' promo films for the 1966 single Paperback Writer/Rain. Although we couldn't walk through the interior of the greenhouse, we did go out by the statues and monuments. And, in groups of four, we recreated scenes with three playing air guitar and the fourth leaning against a statue or sitting and nodding – the way Ringo did in those original films.

I was in a group with another George devotee, Lisa, who insisted that she do the Harrison part. I acquiesced and agreed to be Ringo for that shot. But we did another bit, and reversed roles. So, I was stuck behind a tree branch. Fair is fair, right?

Meanwhile, lunch at Turk's Head found me more like myself. That meant I felt I could eat a meal without worrying about not keeping it down. So, I enjoyed typical Brit food, fish and chips, and soaked in the atmosphere. In that very pub, Ringo was filmed eating lunch during his famous "day out" during A Hard Day's Night. Colin (our guide) also told us that the location was used during Help, too.

A highlight of the restaurant visit was listening to Lennon's first cousin David Birch, who gave quiet recollections about growing up with John in Liverpool. David bore a striking resemblance to his famous cousin, with his Lennon-esque Roman nose. That was something most of us picked up on right away. It was like John being in the room with us.

Tony Bramwell also delighted the pilgrims with his banter and insight, particularly about the Liverpool years. He also answered some of our inquiries. When I raised my hand to ask a rather mundane question, Tony stared at me and dryly stated "What do *you* want?"

With that, I felt as though I was in a 1964 Beatles press conference, having a question shot down with humor by one of the Fab Four. It was a priceless moment for me.

The afternoon featured a drive past underwhelming Twickenham Studios, which looked like a non-descript warehouse.

Much more thrilling was spending time at Marylebone Station, the venue for the famous opening sequence of *A Hard Day's Night*. Scenes such as the Beatles running down a sidewalk to flee screaming fans, where George clumsily falls – prompting the other Fabs to crack up.

Or, the front of the train station, the place the Beatles fake out the fans by entering a car on one side and exiting out the other.

The good news is that canopy area looks just as you might remember. And Tony Maddalone made the stop even more memorable, videotaping all of us running in slow motion down the famous sidewalk. And no, there weren't any slip-ups!

Also part of the itinerary were stops at London homes of Freddie Mercury and Jimmy Page. The latter was very interesting, because the ex-Led Zeppelin guitarist still lives there and is in a dispute with his neighbor – who wants to put a swimming pool in his basement, much to Jimmy's dismay.

Colin also reminded us that much of life is timing. Just 24 hours earlier, Jimmy Page was spotted walking down the street in front of his home. But alas, no sight of him during our 10-minute visit.

On the way back to our hotel, where we said so-long to Colin, we swung by the famous Royal Albert Hall for another round of cool photographs and videos.

About 10 of us, including Tony Bramwell, later went to an Italian eatery to put a tasty capper on our trip's London portion. The Beatles Pilgrimage Tour would be packing up and heading to Liverpool on Tuesday, with a couple important stops along the way.

Time to set the alarm clock and get reacquainted with that suitcase.

TUESDAY, Oct. 8 – ROAD TRIP OF ALL ROAD TRIPS

The third full day of the tour (Day 5 of my vacation) was our getaway, the appointed time to leave London and travel some 220 miles northwest to the "Birthplace of the Beatles."

Although there were no psychedelic paintings on the coach, the day would resemble our very own "Magical Mystery Tour." Not much to see here. Ah, but over there...

Actually, there were plenty revelations along the way. First up, the bus rolled up to the front gates of Friar Park. Although I had paid a special visit on my own a few days earlier, it still was a big moment to get there again.

Just as I thought, there only was time for people to walk up to the Friar Park sign, peer through the fence (there were lawn mowers within view) and have the occasion documented on their smartphones.

We had less than an hour before the bus would pick us up outside the Henley Pizza Station, so everybody was free to check out the picturesque village on their own. Before leaving Friar Park for good, I reached inside the fence and pinched a nice, large tree leaf. I lovingly squeezed it between my thumb and forefinger, briefly tempted to snatch it but ultimately rejecting that notion.

I then stopped by the town hall, along with Jessica and her mom Martha, where we flipped through a hardcover book about the pre-Harrison history of Friar Park.

Next was a solo stop at Starbucks (yes, they are everywhere). I picked up black coffee and what was described on the menu as a “raisin and oat” cookie.

Different phrases and descriptions used in England helped make it a memorable experience for American travelers. The triangular sign located at intersections looked the same as back home, but instead of imploring drivers to “Yield” it stated to “Give Way.”

When getting off trains and subways, you had better “Mind the Gap” and signage at stairwells cautioned people to “Mind Your Head.” Such good fun.

Unfortunately, I lost track of Jessica and Marsha and couldn’t spot anybody else I knew. So my chance to visit the Henley gravesite of 1960s singer Dusty Springfield (some of her ashes are buried behind a village church) went by the wayside.

Thankfully, I made it back to the bus for the next planned stop – Stratford-upon-Avon, the birthplace of William Shakespeare. That stop was an hour or so from Henley-on-Thames. Between the two villages, music from George’s acclaimed All Things Must Pass album was tastefully played, nicely tying in with the Friar Park visit.

At Stratford, several of us went to an eatery for lunch. It was a bit of an afternoon tea experience, as all of us drank the hot stuff and munched on tasty scones (with jam). Tiny sandwiches also were consumed, as we checked off another item from the proverbial British checklist.

From there, the full group got back on the bus and sat back for the rest of the day’s journey to Liverpool. Rolling fields and farms were prevalent on both sides of the coach and Beatles music filled the air. A nearby passenger, Melissa, said the landscape we saw mirrored that of Scotland. Perhaps visiting other countries of the United Kingdom would be something to consider for a future vacation.

The relaxing ride soon concluded at our final destination – the Hard Day’s Night Hotel in Liverpool.

The hotel is a Beatle’s fan’s dream with nothing but Fab décor through and through. My room featured a portrait of John Lennon enjoying a cigarette and drink and the attention to Beatle detail truly amazed me. Instead of a Do Not Disturb sign, doorknob placards implore maids to “Let It Be.” The flip side cheekily stated “I Need You.”

After checking in and before turning in for the night, about nine or 10 of us went to another Italian restaurant, Gino D’Acampo, a rather upscale spot suggested by Beatles Pilgrimage Tour assistant Patrick “Paddy” Bourke (a Liverpool resident with a pronounced Irish accent).

On the way to Gino’s, we walked around the corner from the hotel onto Mathew Street. The wow factor went up another notch as we saw the original location of the world-famous Cavern Club (with late singer Cilla Blake’s statue out in front).

Other Beatle-themed pubs and museums abound. Those included the “newly recreated” Cavern Club, a couple hundred feet from the actual place where the Fab Four cut their musical chops and took England by storm in 1962 and 1963.

Paddy also pointed across a street to the stately Liverpool Town Hall. Up on that balcony, he said, was where the Beatles waved to a throng of some 200,000 people on the streets below following the July 1964 northern England premiere of the A Hard Day’s Night movie.

If only there were a time machine to go back to the days of Beatlemania, right? Well, the next best thing was taking the Beatles Pilgrimage Tour with a fun group of folks who all “get it” when it comes to celebrating the Fab Four’s inescapable legacy. For many of us on the tour, a love affair started 55 years ago and it’s never really stopped.

Wednesday, Oct 9 – CELEBRATING JOHN’S 79th BIRTHDAY IN STYLE

John Lennon would have turned 79 on this day. If not for one crazy shooter in December 1980, maybe John would have been lurking out to say hello to this reverent group.

We’ll never know of course. But spending Oct. 9 on the Beatles Pilgrimage Tour paying special tribute to John was like knowing he was there with us. And Liverpool by its very nature is a living, breathing monument to his memory – as well as those of George Harrison and Brian Epstein.

The first of two full days seeing Liverpool promised to be a bit more emotional simply for the Lennon birthday commemoration.

First stop was a National Trust tour of John’s childhood home in Mendips, actually 251 Menlove Ave. The tour was split into halves, with the first bunch seeing the home at 10 a.m. and the rest of us (including myself) going at 11 a.m.

While waiting for our group to enter, it was time for more photos and video to capture the visit. One of my favorite new Beatle pals, Tom Bosket, took a quick pic with my smartphone. In turn, I took his to document the moment for him. But time was short and we had to put our devices away for the Lennon home tour.

The docent was pleasant as could be. She also knew every nook and cranny of John Lennon’s life during the years he lived with Aunt Mimi, a time during which he discovered Elvis and met a chap named Paul McCartney.

For example, she pointed to the backyard as a place John toiled to use a push mower to cut the grass. Most of us of a certain age certainly remember what that was like.

When we entered the home, it was like going to a museum. We couldn’t take photos, so we had no snap mental images to never forget what we saw. In one of the rooms, we envisioned the space where John, Paul and George toyed around with rudimentary guitars as they worked on their Quarrymen repertoire.

Another favorite spot was the enclosed front porch, an echo chamber where John first found out that his voice could be drastically changed. I checked it out with Gary. We closed the door and started singing “I Am The Walrus.” It was great fun, until we couldn’t open the door to get back into the house!

We weren't left behind after all, and the amazing Lennon tour concluded. Next up was another National Trust gem – we would get to see the home where Paul McCartney lived during the years he transformed from boy to Beatle.

A different docent met us in front of 20 Forthlin Road. The McCartney tour was just as revelatory. Just like with the Lennon home, great efforts were made to show the rooms as close as humanly possible to what they looked like in the mid-1950s.

Paul's dad was a champion of music, we were told. At the piano, dad and son would play show tunes and harmonize. The seeds that would sprout in 1967 with *When I'm Sixty-Four* were planted then.

The walls featured candid black and white photos taken by Paul's brother Mike. There were never-before seen photos of the young men who would soon change the world. Per tour rules, nobody could use their phones, so Fab fans such as us could only look hard and long at the photos in hopes of mentally imprinting them.

Visiting the two homes was one of many highlights of the trip. Seeing what life was like for the greatest songwriting team in pop music history – not to mention how guitar-obsessed George entered the picture as a school chum of Paul's – snapped a puzzle piece in place as to what helped make the Beatles connect with the world a few years later.

They were regular guys from regular families who paid their dues. Most of us can relate to that. Their story resonates and inspires even as the 2020s loom. Evidence is mounting that the Beatles will be celebrated for decades to come, too.

The National Trust portion of the day concluded as we were returned to the drop-off point near the Royal Albert Dock (a 15-minute walk from our hotel). There was time to jump on the ferry across the Mersey, check out the Beatles Story museum or check out statues of the 1963-era Beatles.

Once again, I had to pinch myself that I was actually seeing the Beatle sights I never thought I would.

A few hours later, we reconvened with our Liverpool tour guide Jackie Spencer now leading us. It was time for a "pub crawl" including stops at Ye Cracke (a 19th century pub where teen Lennon famously drank) and the Philharmonic – the spot where Paul performed a surprise 'Carpool Karaoke' gig in 2018.

Back at the Hard Day's Night hotel, about 10 of us toasted John's birthday with Brandy Alexanders, apparently one of Lennon's favorites. Just perfect.

Happy birthday indeed. Thanks Mr. Lennon.

Thursday, Oct. 10 – NEARING 'THE END' OF A MAGICAL WEEK

Almost a year earlier, I found out my employer was giving me a chance for early retirement. It was then that I first seriously considered taking the Beatles Pilgrimage Tour. Soon would be a deposit and months of planning and anticipation followed.

And all of a sudden, the trip of a lifetime only had a day or two left. But no need to cry about it. The itinerary for Day 5 of the guided tour would be jam-packed and overflowing, perhaps like a Sgt. Peppers recording session.

With wonderful Jackie Spencer at the front of the bus, announcing where we were, what it meant and where we would go next, all we had to do was sit back and soak it all in. Oh, and we would later get to meet “Good Ol’ Freda” Kelly – the renowned Beatles Fan Club secretary who spent a decade of her young life with the Fabs.

It was a whirlwind adventure in the suburbs of Liverpool. We saw the modest home where the future Beatles made their first recording as the Quarrymen (“That’ll Be The Day”), which was played over the bus loudspeakers.

Another poignant stop was 12 Arnold Grove, the birthplace of George Harrison. It was unbelievable that George began life in a tiny, two-up/two-down home and spent his final years in a huge Henley castle. As he once said, being a Beatle was no hindrance!

The bus rolled up to the hospitals where John and Paul were born and to the places they lived very early on such as 9 Newcastle Road and 5 Sunbury Road.

As we could check out Liverpool’s football stadium (where they play soccer, of course), Jackie played a live Macca tune recorded there during a Capital of Culture concert in 2008.

Yet one more amazing visit was to the Casbah Coffee Club, the place where Lennon, McCartney, Harrison and original Beatles drummer Pete Best took over for a run of sellout concerts predating their Cavern Club days.

Roag Best, who is the son of the late Apple executive Neil Aspinall, and half-brother to Pete, provided us with a wonderful presentation. It was revelatory, part of the story that doesn’t get told much: Mum Mona Best was a savvy entrepreneur who secured a contract for the boys to play in her basement.

The Beatles soon thereafter went to Hamburg and returned to the Casbah for a second run -- as seasoned performers.

The club looked much as it did back then. A painting of a spider’s web was the stage backdrop. And that downstairs stage was claustrophobic. Imagine the Fab Three (sorry Pete) stuck on that cellar stage, kicking out the jams while hordes of teenagers closed in on them?

One could spend a full day just checking out the Casbah. But alas, it was back to the bus for more Fab locales.

For lunch, the group went to Strawberry Fields, which is operated by the Salvation Army. Lunch consisted of tasty scouse, and the subsequent self-guided tour was well worth the time.

We were joined on the bus by one of the Quarrymen, Len Garry, who after some prodding broke into a couple Elvis tunes. He can still bring it!

Just as memorable were stops at the Eleanor Rigby gravesite, a visit to the church where Paul met John during a July 1957 Quarrymen concert, and a spin down the actual Penny Lane – followed by a short interlude at the Penny Lane visitor center.

Yes, our driver took us past the barber shop made famous in the 1967 song, and circled the roundabout. That hit single really came to life before our very eyes.

Later in the afternoon, with rain falling, Jackie pointed out Ringo's birthplace (9 Madryn Street), and another home depicted on the Sentimental Journey album cover. Unfortunately, with rain and construction, we weren't able to get a closer look at the Ringo sites.

Before closing out the day's scheduled activities, it was back to Hard Day's Night Hotel.

Downstairs in Hari's Bar, only used for private functions, our entourage enjoyed time chatting with Freda Kelly. She regaled us with tales of her time answering bushels of fan mail and sending out clips of hair and pillow cases to crazed Beatlemaniaics.

Freda also posed for photos and handed out some of her personal artifacts, primarily old photos once stuffed into envelopes for fans.

Like many of us, I bought a copy of the Freda documentary (Good Ol' Freda), which she personalized. That was a program I couldn't wait to watch after making it back home.

Although Freda was in the eye of the hurricane, she somehow kept an even keel throughout her life. Never comfortable with the limelight, she was quite easy-going and relaxed with all of us. It was like chatting with an aunt during a family reunion. I truly enjoyed getting to meet her!

Everybody left Hari's Bar and had free time for an hour or so before reconvening for dinner. Since this would be our final group meal, it was off to an exquisite Italian eatery. The food was paid for, but folks were responsible for their adult beverages.

Happily, the wine flowed. So did the laughter and good times. One of my worries about the tour was whether I could get along with "strangers," acerbated by the fact I went solo to England. It was an unfounded fear. Everybody on the Beatles Pilgrimage Tour was welcoming and delightful.

Unbelievably, however, we were down to one final day together.

Friday, Oct. 11 – ONCE MORE WITH GUSTO

That dreaded last day was upon us and rain fell harder than it had the entire week. That the weather held up most of the time was almost a miracle, especially since there were all types of weather warnings connected with Hurricane Lorenzo – particularly threatening the first few days of the trip.

But after another tidy breakfast of porridge, coffee and raisin toast, it was time for each of us to get our umbrella ready for action.

The group had a soggy 15-minute walk from Hard Day's Night Hotel to the first scheduled activity. We were going to the Beatles Story museum, not far from those Fab Four statues and the Mersey Ferries (incidentally, the famous subject of a Gerry and the Pacemakers hit record from 1963).

Once inside, it was time for another self-guided tour. You wore headphones and carried a device with you from location to location. Then, you hit the corresponding button to match whatever station you were at and take it all in.

Of course, Beatlemaniaics already knew about everything displayed inside. There were stations devoted to the Cavern Club, to EMI Studios, the historic appearance on Ed Sullivan, and on and on.

Yet it still was a chance to see it all from a different perspective. Looking down into a rectangular bunker containing three guitars and a drum kit, surrounded by plexiglass, it was easy to blink and be transported back to EMI Studios for one of those early recording sessions with Sir. George Martin.

Tastefully done were exhibits for each of the four Beatles, as well as go-to displays for Sgt. Peppers (the colorful suits were dazzling to say the least) and the famous rooftop concert. It also was emotional to see the white piano and electric guitar used by John during the 1971 Imagine sessions.

I was so enthralled by the contents of the Beatles Story that I almost forgot my umbrella. Thankfully, it was still where I left it a couple exhibits back. Whew!

Pretty much the rest of the day was up to each of the Beatle pilgrims, although we did have a voucher admitting us to the new Magical Beatles Museum – located just down the street from the “reimagined” Cavern Club.

Around supper time, we all were slated to get together at the hotel for a final round of drinks and goodbyes, not to mention exchanging pertinent contact information for future e-mails and posts.

But other than that, it was a fill-in-the-blanks kind of day. For me, I made sure to take the “Ferry ‘Cross the Mersey” regardless of weather conditions. Luckily, the rain stopped long enough for the 50-minute cruise to be very enjoyable and memorable.

Seeing the Liverpool skyline from the river was quite spectacular.

Back on land again, I lugged my way back to Mathew Street and finally visited the “new” Cavern. Whoever recreated the famous pub did so remarkably well.

Nothing can replace the original, of course, but for visitors in 2019, this is our only option. I sipped on that beer much slower than normal as I listened to the pub band and took mental snapshots of the archways and perused rock memorabilia affixed to the brick walls.

From there, it was over to the Magical Beatles Museum for more visual delights. George’s psychedelic “Rocky” guitar was something to behold, as was the piano used during filming of “I Am The Walrus” for the Magical Mystery Tour movie.

Taking the day’s two museums together, my Beatle brain was starting to get overloaded by all the mesmerizing photos and artifacts. But believe me, it was all good. And it also was crazy to actually be in England experiencing all that I had merely read about over the years.

When I stepped out of the second museum came the realization that all good things must come to an end. But in some ways taking the Beatles Pilgrimage Tour was a true beginning – it finally connected the dots and made real sense as to why the world changed forever thanks to four lads from Liverpool!

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