

# Bath-ing in sunlight

Expecting Herculean weather on his way to his trip from Bristol to Bath, this writer instead met with unexpected (but welcome) sunshine

TEXT, PHOTOS BY RISHAD SAAM MEHTA  
smdmail@mid-day.com

YOU look bright-eyed for this early in the morning!" the lady at Border Control observed, "so what is your purpose for visiting the UK?"

It was 6.45 am and I had arrived at London Heathrow's Terminal 5 looking as fresh as one of the daffodils that had compelled Wordsworth to rhyme because I had been treated to a full night of fitful sleep on British Airways' Club World seat. "I'm a travel writer and I'm going to drive down to Bristol and Bath, explore and take a few pictures," I replied.

"In this weather?" she said with a weary sigh, probably recalling the heavy snows and bitter cold that London had recently seen.

It really seemed the wrong time to be in England because winter had firmly set in and it seemed that all the pictures I'd get would be gray and gloomy and it would be cold and wet.

My plan was to drive in the new Skoda Superb with my cousin, her husband and their kids from Reading to Bristol.

Everyone who has ever travelled with kids aged four and below will know that time tables made the previous evening are theoretical and delays are mandatory. So by the time the child seats were strapped in and the cavernous boot of the car had swallowed the perambulator and baby bags along with other pieces of luggage and we hit the M4 towards Bristol, we were already 90 minutes behind schedule.

But it was all inconsequential because looking out at the horizon through the windshield I could see blue skies without a hint of cloud. It was a lovely day and the temperature had jumped from the week's norm of 4 degrees to a pleasing 11 degrees C.

It seemed a shame to waste such good weather driving on the straight and boring motorway and we pulled off at the next junction to take the country roads to Bristol. Immediately the little villages and stone houses with immaculate gardens affront fully completed the picture of an

English driving holiday.

The Skoda's touch screen in-car entertainment console had all local radio stations available at a touch, but little two-year-old Friya was singing "the wheels on the bus go round and round" with so much enthusiasm that I dialled down the volume. Four-year-old Zahan was busy pointing out cows in the fields and very seriously asking his mum when we'd get to Bristol so that he could have a bath. He'd caught the word Bath in our chatter about Bristol and had naturally assumed that we were all going to Bristol to have a bath.

Bristol was brimming with activity the Friday afternoon we got there. Locals were making most of the cloudless sky and our hotel, the Thistle Grand, Bristol was right at the head of Corn Street that led to the city centre. This street is also the venue for the St Nicholas Market, a very colourful street market where you can buy an array of stuff from 'colon cleaning' hot sauces to old Jazz vinyl's re-mastered on CD to designer cheeses. And then there was the shop that sold just sweets and chocolates all arranged in jars in a very colourful display.

The next morning our plan was to head for Bath, and I woke up early to yet another sunny day and went for a ramble around Bristol just as the sun was peeping over the sloping roofs of the cities Victorian houses. I walked past the city centre to the Bristol Cathedral where a statue of our very own Raja Ram Mohan Roy stands tall. The Indian philosopher, reformer, patriot, scholar and a founding father of Indian renaissance — as the plaque below the statue states — died here in Bristol on 267th of September 1833. Down the road from the Cathedral is the imposing building that houses the Bristol museum standing by the tall Gothic tower of the University of Bristol.

*It was a lovely day and the temperature had jumped from the week's norm of 4 degrees to a pleasing 11 degrees C*

By the time I got back to the hotel we were all ready to tuck in to the splendid English breakfast in the hotels restaurant.

Fortified we hit the road to Bath. The ancient city that the Romans built for a jolly soak thanks to the hot water springs is just 13 miles from Bristol. Zahan was still under the impression that we were going there for a bath and he wondered aloud whether we had packed soap and towels.

The Skoda Superb's 1.8 litre turbo charged engine was a delight on the A4 to Bath. Even in the 6th gear the turbo



would deliver enough torque for rapid acceleration.

Even on our brief spell on the M4 yesterday the car had to be kept in check lest it cross the 70 mph speed limit. But I just wish the brakes had a more positive feel, they need a firm foot on the pedal to bleed away speed, rather than a gentle caress which would have felt more reassuring.

But the one aspect which is immediately noticeable is the sound-proofing of the car. Even at a good clip, a little over the speed limit, road noise hardly filters through. You could very well enjoy a concerto at low volume or talk in a whisper and still be heard. It is so quiet in the cabin.



today this square was as crowded as I'd seen London's Leicester Square last summer. While the Roman Baths are a UNESCO site, I found the 11 quid entrance fees rather steep but yet it is one of Britain's most popular attractions. Built by the Romans in the 1st century AD over one of Bath's three natural springs it was left to decay when the Romans departed until the end of the 17th century when it was rediscovered and multitudes arrived to 'take the soak cure'. Today Zahan had arrived too looking forward to doing the same, but he was most disappointed when he finally realised that there was no bathing going to happen in Bath. But in truth you can have a soak in Bath if you do wish because the newly constructed Thermae Spa complex in Bath is newly constructed and taps the very same springs as the Romans. Its rooftop hot water pool is a pure delight; unfortunately it is not open to children.

*Four-year-old Zahan was busy pointing out cows in the fields and very seriously asking his mum when we'd get to Bristol so that he could have a bath*

The indulgent English breakfast tided us over lunch but late in the afternoon we sat down in a cosy cafe for some tea, scones and chocolate tarts. High on sugar and buzzing with energy, Friya was like a loose cannon ball in the park by the Avon River and all of us had our work cut out as she ran across the grass and crawled into hedges.

We got back to Bristol in time for dinner which we had in the Commercial Rooms, by far the most atmospheric pub I have been to in the UK.

The next day after we spent the entire morning and half the afternoon at the Bristol zoo we headed back to London pointing the nose of the Skoda down the M4 — as if on cue, knowing that our weekend break had ended — it started to rain. But that was fine, we'd had three days of fun in the sun.

1 St Nicholas Market, Bristol  
2 Hotel Grand, Bristol  
3 In the Skoda, on the way 1420 to Bristol  
4 Sweet shop in Bristol  
5 Cutting the perfect wedge of Somerset sheep's cheese  
6 Sulking because the 'bath' did not happen, Bath  
7 The tea, scones and tarts were finger licking good, Bath

