

# An unusual bus journey in London

On a grey, rainy November day, which is not uncommon in England, we set off on our way back from Kingston to Chichester. At Richmond Bus Terminal, we had to change buses. Unfortunately, the bus drove away right in front of us, and the next one wouldn't come for another 20 minutes. Having to wait outside in this windy and damp cold weather was not very pleasant. We were lucky, as the next bus arrived just a few minutes later. A female bus driver got out and immediately disappeared into the staff lounge. A short time later, she returned with a hot drink in her hand. She must have seen us upon arrival; in any case, she invited us that we could already get on.

She kindly enquired about the destination of our journey. We told her that we had been visiting friends and were now on our way to Chichester, our home on the south coast. She noticed our foreign accent and wanted to know where we were from. We told her that we had moved to London from Berlin many years ago. She didn't seem to mind that we were German. She had emigrated from Jamaica and had been living in Brixton/London for many years with two teenage sons. She had been divorced from her husband for a long time. Curious and unbiased, she asked us. 'And where are your wives?'

Bernd and I looked at each other questioningly for a moment. Without words, we agreed that she was impartially curious. So we replied that we were in a same-sex civil partnership. She had no problem with that. One of her brothers was also in a gay relationship.

But then question after question poured out of her and she couldn't be stopped. 'Who is the woman and who is the man in your relationship? Who does the cooking? Who does the washing up? Who does the washing? Who does the shopping? Who looks after the money?' 'She wanted to know everything in detail and wasn't afraid to ask intimate questions, such as who was on top or bottom during sex and who penetrated whom.'

With these questions, she was determined to find out who was the 'woman' and who was the 'man' in our relationship. She didn't accept our answers. We tried to explain to her that we don't live this traditional division of roles. If anything, we are both 'husbands' and nobody defines themselves as a 'wife'.

When she heard that we had been living together for over 45 years, she was speechless for a moment. 'What's your secret?' Our answer was. 'It's simply love!' She laughed, then she would have to go to Berlin, she couldn't find that love in London. She insisted that love wasn't enough to make a relationship last that long. It was only

when we explained to her that our work together had been successful and that we had bonded that she seemed satisfied.

But she didn't want to give up and asked again about the cooking. When we told her that Jochen usually does more of the practical cooking, while Bernd organises and prepares the food, it was clear to her that Jochen was the 'woman' in our relationship. She was glad to have that clarified at least.

Looking at her watch, she was shocked to realise that she had overrun her break. She set the big red bus in motion quickly and with concentration. No other passengers who could have disturbed us had boarded in the meantime. We had also completely lost track of time, the conversation was so lively, funny and intense. The bus soon filled up with more passengers. As Bernd kept coughing, the bus driver handed him a bottle of water during the journey and assured him that she hadn't drunk from it yet.

Once we arrived at Clapham Junction, we had to hurry to catch the train to Chichester. The farewell was short but warm. The bus driver confessed that her work was often monotonous and that she rarely had passengers like us. We left her in her bus with a handshake and good wishes and trudged through the pouring rain to the train.

The encounter with the bus driver was an unforgettable experience for us too.

For a while, we wondered how a stranger could find out so much about our relationship in just a few minutes.

In our younger years, we experienced a lot of discrimination. Today, this no longer seems to be an issue in London.

We have learnt to let go of our caution when it comes to publicly admitting our relationship.

But this caution is still appropriate when travelling to other cultures, which we have often done.