

Cosmo girl

Charlotte Reather might be a country mouse, but she learnt to hold her own in East End pubs during her student days

EVERY month, I go up to London for various meetings and social events. I often hang out in Soho, as many media companies have their offices there, not because I'm on the game – although it's an industry which is credit crunch proof and more lucrative than writing. I love Soho. It's gritty, real and vibrant. You'll see Nick from *The Apprentice* striding past a strip-joint on one side of the street, and on the other a drag queen picking up a blonde's change while a Muslim granny has a good look in the window of an erotic book shop.

Soho is like the countryside in certain ways. There's incredible tolerance. And there's greater integration between the classes, generations and definitely the sexes. Much of London is made up of isolated social pockets, such as Islington, for example. Many Islingtonians will claim to mix with people from other classes all the time. However, most, after double-locking their Banhams, will drive to the next safe middle-class area without seeing anyone in between.

When country people go to town they tend to let loose in a big fashion. Whether it's Edinburgh, Chester or Nottingham, most of us need our city fix from time to time. From old boys' get-togethers reminiscing about past sporting adventures in smart members' clubs to underkeepers clubbing in Newcastle, middle-aged girly theatre trips to see *The Vagina Monologues*, or "larging it" at a progressive techno trance rave with the aid of dancing dusk 'til dawn, country people boost the urban economy with their jaunts.

Recently, I decided to take Comb Over Man (COM) to Soho to see how he fared. He arrived tweeded-up to the max. No one in the media club batted an eyelid. Why would they, when there was a middle-aged man dressed as Dorothy perched on the sofa and a woman in a PVC catsuit at the bar? Time ticked away and COM was soon the centre of attention at the club. Awarded the sobriquet of "Huntsman", he was bought drinks left, right and centre for being brilliantly entertaining and... different. After a change of scene spent in an elderly

thespian's musty basement club, we found ourselves at 4am in an illegal drinking den run by Triads. COM suddenly realised he'd lost his finest tweed. He panicked – someone must have stolen it. We asked at the bar. COM was told to "go and see the boss" upstairs. He returned some time later with his jacket... but minus £20.

Being relaxed, open and, well, countrified about town can land you in trouble. Luckily, most people are infinitely more sensible than I am – which is why I'm writing this column and they are not. When I was 20, I travelled to the East End to meet a geezer called Lou (think Arthur Daley but well 'arder). I first met Lou in a pub in Kingston upon Thames after he'd been acquitted of blackmail, kidnapping and GBH. Unlike the jury, I knew he was guilty. However, when he offered to buy me a drink, I didn't decline – I was a student. After several sharpeners, I discovered he

member of the Royal family." The BMW kicked in. "I bet you are on the dole, live in a council house and at least one member of your family is in jail," I retorted.

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was a stage manager for the RSC at the Barbican. He showered me with free tickets to Shakespeare productions – which for an English student was a coup.

One evening, after watching *Hamlet*, I met Lou for a drink at a boozier called the Green Man. As I entered the establishment everyone stopped talking and stared at me. Before I had even opened my mouth, the Irish landlord, Ender (known thus because he ended people's lives), snarled, "Who the eff let this posh bitch in?" Lou yelled back: "Don't worry, she's wiv me." Lou ordered me a BMW (Baileys, Whisky, Malibu – his tipples of choice). I sipped the sickly concoction and surveyed the scene. A tattooed "Grant Mitchell" grabbed my arm. "I bet you went to private school, have private health insurance and know at least one

Grant's pint glass looked as if it would break in his hand and a vein popped up on his forehead. Ender started laughing, "Two out of three, he owns his own home!" The whole pub fell about. Grant and I high-fived and shared all sorts of hand locks to prove neither was a threat to the other. I downed my BMW.

The day after a night out in the metropolis, one tends to feel rather ordinary. But sitting on the train, I always count my blessings that a) I have survived, and b) I am returning to the countryside – with fields, animals and trees. Spare a thought for our urban friends who are left to contend with the daily conflict and excesses of life in the concrete jungle. ■

Charlotte Reather loves picking up in the Cotswolds and Soho

