

Back for good

As one of 300,000 people who left London in the space of a year, *Siobhan Norton* explains why she couldn't be happier to be back.
Illustration *Dan Woodger*

IF YOU LIVE somewhere outside London and read the national press, you could be forgiven for assuming the capital is a ghost town.

With people hightailing it to Bristol or Birmingham – or anywhere they can find a patch of grass to sit on, a restaurant without a queue snaking down the street and, crucially, an affordable home to buy – you'd think Oxford Street was just tumbleweed and discarded Topshop bags.

Journalists have written in various papers about how we have reached 'peak London', and how all the cool young people are, apparently, getting the hell out. And to an extent, it's true: plenty are leaving. An Office for National Statistics survey last December suggested that nearly 300,000 people left the capital in the year 2015-2016: the highest number in a decade.

I was one of them. I moved to a town 40 miles away, with a plan to move back, eventually, once I'd found a flat I could afford to buy (hollow laugh).

'Buying in London? You're a unicorn!' friends told me. But I'd worked out that, thanks to the Shared Ownership scheme and a very understanding godmother who would let me stay in her spare room rent-free, I could save up enough to get a little place of my own. It would be six months, tops, I told myself.

A year went by. Then 15 months. The commute was hellish, but I started to get comfortable in my new surroundings. The fresh air, the friendliness and my godmother's clingy-but-adorable bichon frise greeting me every evening made it feel like it was a pretty good set-up. 'Why don't you just buy out here?' neighbours cajoled. 'Why would anyone even want to live in London?'

I missed the chaos. I swear I'll never moan about it again



For me, it took a year and a bit to realise exactly why. Because I had started to refer to an evening at a certain celebrity chef's chain restaurant as 'going out for a lovely Italian'. Because of the nights I sat surrounded by various levels of drunkenness on a freezing cold train somewhere outside of Hayes & Harlington station, to hear the driver announce yet another delay.

I missed the galleries, the theatres, the restaurants. I even missed the congestion, and the pollution, and the crowds, and the chaos. Not that I don't love fresh air and the freedom to walk in a straight line, but everyone knows there are places you can go in London for that too. I had to come back.

I have landed in Stockwell, not quite on the property ladder but ladder-adjacent, renting while I wait for them to finish building my very own flat in Brixton. And Stockwell suits me just fine for now: I have a tiny tenth-floor studio with all mod cons and a dazzling view of the London skyline. From my little garret, I can spy Battersea Power Station, The Shard and everything in between, not to mention countless twinkling cranes. I get a thrill of excitement when I open my front door to that view – of a restless, ever-evolving city.

So yes, that's me, with a secret smile on the Central line, while everyone else fans themselves and avoids eye contact. I swear I'll never moan about it again, never again utter the phrase 'seventh circle of hell' in its hallowed tunnels.

That's me, jostling elbows with you in the Barbary over delectable little plates of labneh and fattoush. And that's me practically doing a jig in the queue for Barrafinna (I will *always* be willing to queue for Barrafinna).

And last weekend, that was me, peeking over shoulders at the 'Impressionists in London' exhibition at Tate Britain. Monet's vibrant 'Leicester Square at Night' and his moody Thames sunsets. Pissarro's 'Charing Cross Bridge' and 'Kew Green'. Their hazy renderings of a city still recognisable today show they loved it just as much as I do.

Of course, London is nowhere near being a ghost town. If my skyline of cranes tells me anything, it's that there are plenty of people moving in, even as the 'I've had it with London' minority pack up their things. It'd be a lie to say renting or buying here isn't tough, but this beautiful, chaotic city's art and culture make it a joy to live here – and those restaurant queues go round the block for good reason. ■