

A tale of two cities

Chris Cowls MBE, Chief Executive of Eproductive and HOSPA board member and Katherine Doggrell, editor of The Overview, look at the best of times and the worst of times.

London - Chris

42 was the number of cars yesterday in the station car park of the town where I live, Dorking, Surrey. With a capacity of 328 that car park (which used to be always full) is my personal barometer about the state of London, because if the good burghers of Dorking are here, they aren't there.

I have been enthralled by central London for the 35 years I have worked in and around there - with the place itself in all its finery and frippery, but above all with the people and their sheer diversity. And the beating heart of London that has helped keep it together for centuries? Hospitality, again in all its diversity. From the coffee houses of the 17th and 18th centuries where the insurance and banking systems first emerged to the grand hotels of the 19th century, the swinging clubs and pubs of the 20th century and the world-leading dining scene of this century, hospitality is a key reason why people have always come to London. Or did until March 2020.

Will Dorking station (and the rest of the mass transport system) ever be full again after Covid-19 is a nightmare behind us? Will London and its hospitality heart ever get back to its former self? My sense is

that, whilst the vast numbers of commuters will go down, the other myriad reasons for locals and tourists 'heading up to Town' will be undiminished - the national spectacles, shows, exhibitions, sports, culture, shopping, meeting each other - being at the centre of things. And hospitality will bounce back as an integral part of the experience for those returning. The

businesses that largely existed to service the office working population will shrink as others grow. Ours is a hugely innovative sector, and I know several entrepreneurs who are already working through what London will look like next and how they will make the most of it. The hospitality heart of London will beat differently - but still with the vigour of centuries.



London photos by Roy Harris

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Paris - Katherine

I moved to Paris last year, eager to embrace the cross-border opportunities afforded by speedy rail links, Schengen and a generally outward-looking way of life. And that sounded like a pretty good theory until the barriers shot back up as the pandemic swept in.

The French adopted a full lockdown faster than in England and, to prevent the rioting in the streets for which the people have a gift, the government was quick to outline an €18bn package to support the tourism and hospitality sector.

Then-prime minister Edouard Philippe said: "Tourism is facing what is probably its worst challenge in modern history. Because this is one of the crown jewels of the French economy, rescuing it is a national priority.

"This very French pleasure, which is at the heart of our identity, to meet up, eat well and have a chat, has been compromised by the lockdown first, and then the conditions of lifting that lockdown."

Such wise words weren't enough for Philippe to keep his job, but wise they were. France has a grand tradition of supporting the joys chatting and eating well - over four million people are given luncheon vouchers by their employers to get out every lunchtime and support their local bistro. So it was always going to use its enthusiasm for public debt to protect it. When you've got yourself a decent way

of life going, you want to protect it.

What makes these simple pleasures so valuable is how universal they are. Some nations embrace leaping into cold ponds and hitting themselves with birch twigs, which clearly isn't for all, but most of us can see the delight in sitting in the sun with a drink and maybe some baked goods, watching the world stroll by. There is egalité - seats often face outwards so the lone diner feels no stigma.

The day the lockdown was lifted - allowing outside eating first - the streets

of Paris were crowded with 'ephemeral terraces', constructions of wood and plant pots hastily licensed, giving all restaurants a chance to reopen. And the pent-up luncheon voucher demand delivered, as newly-pedestrianised streets filled with chat and the sound of people eating food they hadn't prepared themselves.

As we head into winter, fears of another lockdown are inescapable. But while the daily routine is at risk, that which gives France its identity is not, and there is comfort to be taken in that.

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