

WEST COUNTRY LIFE

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bookshelf



THE MOST POPULAR BUNNY OF ALL TIME

BEATRIX POTTER was a talented woman ahead of her time. Her tales and illustrations have captivated generations of children.

And now, her Peter Rabbit books are marking 100 years with special anniversary editions and celebrations.

The Tale Of Peter Rabbit has sold 40 million copies in 35 languages. And at libraries, Beatrix Potter is the second most borrowed classic author (after Ernest Hemingway).

There will be centenary Peter Rabbit shows at Cheltenham's spring and autumn festivals and competitions and storytelling, with Peter Rabbit as the guest of honour, at the Peter Rabbit And Friends shop in the High Street at Bourton-on-the-Water tomorrow and Easter Monday (☎ 01451 810335).

Beatrix Potter spent many summers in Gloucestershire, visiting her cousin Caroline Hutton, who lived at Harescombe Grange in the spectacular countryside between Gloucester and Stroud. Her first visit to the county in 1894 was a big event. Despite being 28 years old, she had not been away from home alone for more than five years.

She developed her artistic talent by painting the plants, birds and animals in the Gloucestershire countryside and even collected a menagerie of small animals, including the rabbits and ducks that were to later appear as illustrations in her Peter Rabbit stories set in the Lake District.

Beatrix also spent a great deal of time in Gloucester during the summer of 1894, and drew many sketches of buildings in the historic Westgate area of the city, which were later used in *The Tailor Of Gloucester*.

Between 1894 and 1906, Beatrix frequently travelled by steam train to stay with her cousin and recorded many details and sketches of Gloucestershire in her secret journals.

The Tailor Of Gloucester is special in that it is the only story ever written by Beatrix Potter that is about real people.

There actually was a tailor of Gloucester who found some unfinished garments mysteriously completed when he returned to his shop near the cathedral one Monday morning. His name was John Pritchard and the shop where he made the outfit for the Mayor of Gloucester has become a Beatrix Potter Centre (☎ 01452 422856).

It is a charming twist in the tale.

PHILIP COOKE

Expert on tourism from Gloucester-based Destination Marketing UK

Philip Cooke flies VIP in Seat 1A, to arrive in Africa on cloud nine

I WAS excited when I was told that I had to fly to South Africa and that my client would pay for the ticket. I was punching the air when he told me that he wanted me fresh and that I should fly Virgin Upper Class; but my juices really began to flow when the ticket arrived and I discovered that I had been allocated Seat 1A. There was a magical sound to Seat 1A.

Does life get any better than this? Virgin Upper Class to Johannesburg at someone else's expense. Ten hours in this seat called 1A; ten hours of relaxation, luxury and all of the excitement that goes with international travel. I couldn't wait for it to start.

And what a great start it was as the free Virgin limo service picked me up from home. I had no worries about getting to LHR on time and, as I settled in to the rear passenger seat, I felt like an MP or the Chief Executive of a multinational company.

My driver made it even more of a boys' own adventure as he told me about the real VIPs he had driven and how he had just taken an evasive driving course with the SAS, to enable him to escape high-jackers and terrorists.

Suddenly we were at Terminal 3, Heathrow Airport car park and the limo pulled into the Virgin Upper Class check-in area. My window wound down and a nice Virgin lady asked me for my ticket and passport, which she took away. I began to panic a little. Then she returned and wished me a pleasant journey.

The car moved off. "Hang on, don't I get out here?" I asked the driver. "Not yet sir," he said as we entered the car park and drove to the airport entrance, then, "This is it," he said "Goodbye. Have a good trip."

"But, where has my suitcase gone?" I asked in renewed panic. "All sorted sir, you can pick it up in South Africa." Sorted — it can't be sorted: What about checking in, ticket queues, luggage tags, security checks, delays, crowds and aggravation? "Sir," he said, "It's sorted. You're a VIP."

So I tried to look very cool and pretended that I knew what I was doing. So I followed the Fast Track signs and suddenly I was air-side. This was too easy; I must have missed something, but what? Look confident, I told myself as I entered the Virgin Lounge.

The lounge was a huge but nearly empty. A few businessmen were watching the Canadian

Grand Prix on a massive television screen, a couple of execs were huddled over their lap-tops and a few lost souls, including me, were wandering around trying to make sure that everything really was free.

It was. Free food, free drink, free music, free books, free haircut, free shave, free world-wide telephones, free Internet. Free everything.

Time to kill, so I tried the free stuff. Pimm's, followed by Italian Nachos — nachos, covered with olives, sundried tomatoes and mozzarella cheese. Then I made loads of phone calls, just to tell everyone I know where I was and because it was free.

The lounge soon filled with business customers all eating and drinking, some with elegance and restraint and some, like gannets. I ordered a Vodka Martini to help me live out my James Bond fantasy. This is true.

Suddenly, it was time to go and I simply walked straight on to the plane. I was getting used to the absence of queues. As I entered the aircraft and presented my boarding pass, the flight attendant quipped: "Seat 1A, sir, You're driving us tonight then are you?" I looked confused and worried, so the young lady took



The shape of airliners to come

pity on me. "Only joking sir," she smiled, "It's as far forward as you can go — the first window seat on the right-hand side."

Actually the seat was so big, I could see out of three windows. I had yards of leg-room and settled down next to a friendly international financier who was in Seat 1B. I was hoping for a movie star or a model. Well, it would have happened to Pierce Brosnan.

Then something strange caught my eye. Elegant and expensively dressed fellow upper classers were, one by one, disappearing up front with plastic bags under their arms and emerging moments later clad in shapeless grey and purple tracksuits. Elegant Boss suits were being exchanged for Richard Branson's designer jimjams.

I was not feeling secure enough to join the pyjama party and my trousers were definitely staying on. I was then intrigued to discover that the sick bag was called an Amenity Bag. Surely, a sick bag is a sick bag, even for Upper Class people.

Then suddenly, we had taken off and were on our way south; south across Europe over the Mediterranean and then on to Africa. The front of the aeroplane was not only luxurious, it was strangely quiet, and you can see more because you have three windows to look out of and there's no wing in the way.

It was not long before dawn was breaking over Africa. It was a wonderful sight, a wonderful flight with a wonderful crew. Long live the unforgettable Seat 1A.

☐ Philip Cooke is the director of Gloucester-based Destination Marketing UK.

