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# I had to rely on the kindness of strangers

## Can you travel around Britain on £5 a day? Leon Logothetis tried it

Penny Wark

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Wherever he was, Leon Logothetis took care not to offend. So he avoided putting his strange request to those who might find it unsettling — in particular to young women and elderly people — and homed in on anyone else who might be persuaded to help. He was travelling around Britain on £5 a day, he told them. Could they put him up for the night? Would they give him food or help with transport?

You might think this cheeky. Most of the people Leon approached thought just that, or perhaps after years of being canvassed for the price of a cup of tea by street sleepers and addicts they dismissed him as a beggar or a scrounger. But what is more remarkable is that many did help, and so Leon succeeded in travelling from London to Scotland and back again, via Wales and the West Country, without busting his budget. The kindness of strangers did the rest, and some strangers were very kind indeed.

It was, Leon explains, a social experiment through which he would assess the respective generosity of people in different locations, and test his own resourcefulness. At the age of 28, middle-class and privately educated, he understood that he had relied heavily on his family for much of his life, and that he might benefit from moving outside his comfort zone.

There was another motive — Leon would be accompanied by a three-person film crew who would document his adventures. So, starting from his home in West London, he set off, walking to Victoria coach station where he spent £2 on a bus ticket to Cambridge. The rules were simple: £5 a day with no exceptions, unspent money could not be carried over to the next day, he could spend only one night in each lodging, and he would not stay in homeless shelters needed by people who really were homeless. He could work but not beg, and he could not accept cash, only kindness. Neither would he receive any help from the film crew, who would travel, eat and board without financial restrictions.

In Cambridge, he was fed by firemen who allowed him to sleep on the station floor, and a bus driver allowed him to travel free to Nottingham. During the next 17 days he would go lobster fishing in the North Sea, stay with the family of the Earl of Glasgow in their castle, sleep on a pub bench in the company of a noisy parrot called Eric in Kendal, and on the floor of a police station under a policeman's jacket in Bangor. In Whitby the remains of his day's allowance — £1.47 — bought him a £100 hotel room, and in Blackpool he was allowed to stay in a hotel for 5p, in exchange for a night's performance on the karaoke machine. "The one thing I can't do is sing," Leon says.

**He is an unassuming** man, polite and well spoken though by no means overconfident. He left his family's brokerage business two years ago and went travelling, and his venture into making a documentary making is a self-conscious bid for independence. Did the presence of a film crew encourage people to be generous because, in his own words, "some crazy bald man" seeking freebies is less likely to rob or abuse a stranger when being filmed? Yes, he acknowledges, that is probably the case.

"The people who were more likely to help were the ones who looked like me and who perhaps could relate to me. When I asked for help they had to make a split-second decision and I was more likely to get a positive response if they were white and middle class. People in small towns tended to be more open, and the further north I went, the more people were willing to help. In the South, specifically in London, people weren't very nice."

The exception to the North-South experience was Glasgow, he says. "I felt threatened there, on edge, as

though no one wanted to mess with anyone. But throughout the UK I felt as though most people surround themselves with an invisible barrier. They don't want to get too close, and if they took me into their homes they were taking me into their lives."

This observation is also the outcome of a similar trip in the US where Leon recently travelled on \$5 a day from New York to Los Angeles. "Times Square was like London. People were rude. But elsewhere in the US anyone and everyone would help. My British accent probably helped. The man or woman in the street in the US was much more willing to give than the man or woman in the street in the UK, who was more guarded, not as relaxed. But when it came to getting free hotel rooms and bus rides it was more difficult in the US, which is very corporate, so they were unwilling to help, and I had to pick up lifts from drivers in gas stations. But in the UK people were much more willing to break the rules with a free ride or a free meal."

How would he have reacted if he'd been approached by his strange and simple request for help, unaccompanied by a hard luck story? "I'd have said no," he replies. "But I did learn not to be so cynical about life and people. I learnt that if you treat people in a generous fashion and with respect, that's how they treat you back. If you can get through the veil of standoffishness, they will open their arms to you. But there were negatives. The vast majority of people didn't want to help me."

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