



Immigration and British citizenship have been much in the headlines in recent months as our politicians continue to debate what 'being British' really is. Here, two people who have recently been made British citizens in the borough of Barnet - one a long-term resident and one a recent arrival - tell us about the ceremony and what it means to them.

I'm a British citizen at last

By Betti Blatman

After living in this country for many years, I was finally due to become a British citizen. Unfortunately, the day this was to happen was 7 July. While at the hairdresser I heard the radio news of the terrorist bombs in central London and the atmosphere in the salon changed immediately, with reactions of horror and disbelief.

My own mood changed from excitement to sadness. Throughout the day I was receiving phone calls, texts and emails from friends and family abroad checking that we were not in central London and asking if we were okay. All I could say was that I was finally going to be a British citizen, today of all days!

I attended the citizenship ceremony at Hendon Town Hall accompanied by my son and friends. We were greeted by the Registrar and completed some documentation, after

which we were introduced to the Mayor of Barnet.

The ceremony began with an introduction to becoming a British citizen and, together with around 20 other new citizens, I pledged allegiance to the Queen and wondered if I should send her a 'thank you' note for allowing me to be one of her subjects. The charismatic Mayor welcomed us all to Barnet but I felt we should be welcomed to Britain or the UK.

We were then presented with our certificates and lovely pens inscribed 'British Citizen 2005'

and invited for a cup of tea and biscuits - in the true British style! We also had the opportunity of being photographed with the Mayor handing us our certificates.

On my return home, I invited my neighbours to join me to celebrate the occasion as best we could. Everybody was discussing the bombs in London that day and how I couldn't have chosen a worse day to finally become a British citizen. Since the ceremony, I have also received my British passport.



Roni Batal and family. Photo by Ann Bronkhorst

Treated like a true British citizen

By Ann Bronkhorst

Friendly, helpful officials, a mayor who speaks to everyone individually and chats to the children, the national flag in view, but furled, and finally the invitation: "Now that you are British, have a nice cup of tea."

Nobody could feel anxious or intimidated at the citizenship ceremony I witnessed recently, one of Barnet's regular twice-weekly ceremonies. Equally, nobody could be unaware of its essential seriousness. The new citizens pledge allegiance to the Queen. Expectations are made explicit: respect for law and order; tolerance; integration; use of the English language; an active role in the community.

Roni's story

Roni Batal, of East End Road, was "hungry for this day", 13 September, when his British citizenship was confirmed at Hendon Town Hall. Later I discovered why he feels so grateful to this country.

Roni is from Syria but he is a Kurd of the Yazidi faith, not a Muslim. Arrested in 1997 and again in 1999 for Kurdish political activities, he was heavily beaten and the injuries still trouble

him - and his family could not trace where he was held.

With their encouragement Roni came to the UK in July 1999. At Heathrow airport, where he applied for asylum, he was amazed that the uniformed officials and police smiled, were not threatening and did not demand bribes. It was his first feeling of freedom. He says, "There was no pressure on my shoulder."

Now settled contentedly in East Finchley - he describes north London as "beautiful, like a paradise" - Roni has worked as a driver and speaks English fluently. He and his South Korean partner Soo Kim have a two-year-old son, Siamand, but it is unclear how long Soo Kim will be allowed to stay in Britain. Life is often difficult but Roni feels confident about the future. "England is my country now," he asserts.

Going Loco

Anita Rai, a television producer, lives in East Finchley. In May she travelled to Mexico to film a new cookery series called 'An Italian in Mexico'. The programme will air daily at 11.30am and 6.30pm on UKTV Food from 26 December onwards. Here she recalls her experiences:

My journey started in Mexico City, after an 11-hour flight. Another seven hours in a van along bumpy roads took me to Oaxaca (pronounced WA-HA-KA), the gastronomic capital of Mexico.

Our first day of filming was at Oaxaca Central Market for our shopping sequences. I have never seen such an array of produce: a patchwork of primary colours, the waft of smoky spices and perfumed fruits, and piles of different types of chilli, beans and vegetables. There are at least 100 varieties of chilli.

We saw tortillas and tequila, and racks of meat hung in grotesque shapes on the stalls. Live

turkeys sat sunbathing in their cages waiting to be someone's dinner.

In the evening there was a terrifying electrical storm. We took refuge in a bar as hail (as big as golf balls) battered the roof. Soon the ground was covered in what looked like slushy snow, something I didn't think I'd see in Mexico.

That evening we dined *al fresco*. Unfortunately, it was May and the ubiquitous May beetle was just starting to rear its ugly head. Every day for one month at dusk they fall from the sky. Black, glossy and two inches in length - they don't care where they land. Within half an hour the patio was covered with a moving black rug. Apparently

it is fun to throw them at each other so I took cover and cowered in a corner until the excitement wore off.

Before returning home, I thought I would try out a *temascal*, a traditional Mexican relaxation ritual, reputedly excellent for body, mind and soul. After stripping to nothing but a white sheet I was whipped with a branch. Trying to suppress my laughter, I was guided into the *temascal*, which is like a stone igloo with hot stones giving a sauna effect. Drinking a strange potion to the sound of bizarre drum music, I slipped into a relaxed trance that had me in its grasp for two days. I rather liked that feeling and would go back again for more.

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