

A place to write

Of course, you can write pretty much anywhere. I've done it on crowded buses and trains, on beautiful beaches, halfway up mountains, all the way up mountains, at home, at work, in coffee shops, down the pub. The best places, I find, are coffee shops.

My current coffee shop of choice is my local: a Costa Coffee, which is a five-minute bike ride from where I live. It occupies the ground floor level of a fairly new development in west Leeds; my home town in the north of England. When I first saw the place, soon after it opened, it didn't immediately impress me as a literary bolt hole: it's panelled with floor-to-ceiling glass on two sides, it has a high ceiling, and there are lots of hard surfaces. So it isn't exactly snug. Added to that, there is a toy shop opposite, so the place tends to have at least one screaming child in it. Small children often run away from their parents in this coffee shop. Often these children are called Finley.

For all its drawbacks, it has this going for it: it is convenient. Situated above the coffee shop is a Pure Gym, where I have a monthly membership. Opposite – a little way along from the toy shop – is a Marks & Spencer food hall. This is the holy grail for connoisseurs of gourmet snacking like myself.

The M&S food hall closes around 7pm on a week day – around the same time as the coffee shop. The gym is open 24 hours. The thing to know about Marks & Spencer is that the food they sell is very good – and expensive. However, they discount their food heavily when it is about to go out of date. The first round of discounting happens in the early afternoon – when as much as half the price may be slashed off certain products. However, the real discounting starts around 5.30pm. This is when the yellow labels are plastered over with more yellow labels, slashing as much as *three-quarters* off the price of foodstuffs. Now there are real bargains to be had.

Example: steamed prawn dim sum. A pack of six of these gelatinous morsels usually costs £2.50 – which is insane. Arrive at the right time in the early evening and you may find a stack of these priced at 65p each. So you snap up four boxes for the price of one.

You really do have to arrive at *just the right time*, because there are bargain-hungry vultures out there. What tends to happen is a shop assistant works her way around the aisles dispensing the magic yellow labels and a small but determined crowd of middle-aged women politely jostle one another to snatch the bargains the moment they hit the shelves. Being much taller than them, I have a valuable advantage, but the advantage is partially offset by the fact that I am not *one of them*, so I tend to be shut out of the scrum. A 6'3" man cannot politely jostle with middle aged women for food bargains. But I don't need much. So once I have a few packets of dim sum and noodles I head for the checkout.

Typically, the food swoop is the last step in a three-part operation. Part One is the gym. I arrive around 2pm – sometimes having snoozed off a night shift from the night before. I typically spend about an hour-and-a-half with the machines and free weights before making my way downstairs to the coffee shop. I drink a flat white and cheekily consume a peanut butter and banana sandwich that I bring with me from home (an unbeatable post-workout snack). I get my laptop out and write for a couple of hours before hitting Marks & Spencer – and then I cycle home. It's a well-established routine.

Despite the unruly children and the slightly clinical atmosphere, I like writing in the coffee shop. The staff are friendly. There is *life*. This is something you miss when you write at home, when you live alone in a small flat. There is no *life*. Sometimes, the coffee shop feels like it has *too much* life. But I've discovered I would rather have too much than too little.

One gripe I have – in addition to the ones I've mentioned – is the loyalty card scheme they are running at Costa. It is without a doubt the meanest I have encountered in any coffee franchise. They try to dress it up by giving you a swipe card and asking you to download an app, rather than just giving you a credit-card sized slip of cardboard that gets stamped every time you drink a coffee. The deal is this: every time you buy a coffee you get ten "points" on your account. One point equals one pence. At the time of writing, a flat white costs £2.60. So that means you need to buy 26 coffees to be eligible for one "on the house". It is a matter of record that in all the time I have been visiting my local Costa I have received two free coffees. That is pretty bad.

Compare the situation with Café Nero: a little credit-card sized piece of cardboard with nine little coffee cup symbols on it. Every time you buy a coffee you get one of the little symbols stamped, and on your tenth visit you get a free coffee. No app, no swipe card, no bullshit: just more free coffee. Naturally, I emailed the customer complaints department at Costa and made this point, and I was told my “comments” would be “passed on”. Of course, I never heard back from them.

So I emailed again. I should have just left it, but it’s the kind of thing that rankles. Someone got back to me, eventually, trying to spin the situation as a positive: they said the swipe card system has the advantage of giving you points on food as well as coffee, so if you buy a monstrously overpriced panini you get a derisory amount of points from that. Of course – being the kind of health-conscious cheapskate who prefers to eat his own home-made peanut butter and banana sandwiches than the produce being sold at the tills, this kind of innovative thinking hardly helps me.

(I didn’t tell them at Costa HQ that I eat my own sandwiches in their coffee shop – although this is common knowledge among the staff on the shop floor. I simply made the point that for people like me, who only purchase coffee, their loyalty scheme doesn’t stack up against their rivals. They thanked me again and told me that my comments would be “passed on”.)

A couple of months ago, something happened that presented me with a possible alternative to getting dicked over by the Costa loyalty scheme: a Starbucks opened over the road. Never having been a regular in Starbucks, on account of a vague but deep-rooted appreciation that it is an evil and unimaginably ruthless company, I walked through the doors on opening day, not really knowing what to expect, and prepared to be pleasantly surprised.

Past the balloons bobbing languidly in the summer air, I found that I was the first – and only – customer. There were three or four baristas chatting behind the bar, a couple of managers floating around pointing at fittings and making phone calls, and another management type sitting at one of the tables with a laptop and a mobile phone, ordering coffee shop-related gear. I asked the smiling barista behind the till: is your loyalty card

scheme any better than Costa's? He conferred with a manager, who assured me that it was. Is it as good as Nero's? The manager admitted it wasn't. I was given a swipe card along with the instructions for its activation and I bought a flat white.

The chatty barista asked for my name. It's standard practice in Starbucks apparently: they ask for your name so they can call for you by name when your coffee is ready. They do this even when you are the only customer who is in the shop. I told him my name. A minute later he said, "Here you are Matthew. Enjoy your coffee." I accepted it with a murmur of thanks and sat at one of the tables next to the manager with the laptop and the phone. I got my own laptop out. After I'd sipped my – very good – coffee, the chatty barista came over to me and said, "Hey, Matthew – just checking everything's alright?" I told him it was.

I went upstairs. It was bloody weird. I was the only person who had ever sat up there and they were playing obtrusively loud and awful muzak-style jazz that made it impossible to have a coherent thought, let alone write a coherent sentence. So I sat outside among the balloons, finished my coffee and swore I would never set foot in another Starbucks.

I think this experience has helped me to accept my local Costa – warts and all. Whenever I buy a coffee these days I just hand over the swipe card with an air of bored detachment as if to say, yes, I'll play your ridiculous corporate game, but don't think I'm going to go cock-a-hoop over it.

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