

Party time! Bacchanalian Britain leaves Europe watching in wonder

A year ago today the PM announced a second lockdown. Now maskless clubbers are throwing caution to the wind

Megan Agnew

Gemma loves going “out-out” so much that she got a personalised numberplate bearing the words. It is after midnight and the hair and beauty technician from Newcastle upon Tyne, dressed as a clown for Halloween, is in the queue for chicken and chips. “Honestly, it’s amazing being back like normal – up dancing, drinking – when we’ve been stuck in forever,” said Gemma, 38.

It is Thursday night and Newcastle is “bouncing”, according to Ellie, 29, who is sitting on a wall outside the chippy. Her friend, Sarah, 22, has had a more “traumatic” night. “That stupid cow in there, I was ready to smack her,” she said. The two friends have just left the nightclub behind them, Popworld. “This woman was dancing on this pole like an absolute – she’s there, she’s in the leopard print,” she nods to her left, “she went, ‘That’s my drink’, I said, ‘No it’s not’. She said, ‘Yes it is, give us my drink now’, and she tipped the drink out of my hand. That’s the craic. I’m fumin’.”

Inside Popworld, the Spice Girls are pumping out and the disco lights are swinging: identity check, wrist stamp and you are in. A barmaid comes round with 20 Jägerbombs to buy straight from the tray and a hen do of eight women drink with straws from a bucket shaped like a cocktail glass, then charge around barefoot.

A year to the day since Boris Johnson announced a second lockdown, we are all out-out.

A plan to require proof of vaccination to attend nightclubs, concerts and other mass events in England was dropped last month and, as a result, the country has some of the most lax Covid hospitality rules in Europe. Since July 19, nightlife has been fully open, without vaccine passports, masks or compulsory testing. In Wales, from November 15, you will need an NHS Covid pass, proving double vaccination or a negative test result, to

enter nightclubs and large events. Proof of full vaccination is needed in Scotland.

The UK has among the highest case rates in Europe. Last week there were 441 Covid cases per 100,000 people. France is at 57 per 100,000; Spain 29; Italy 45; and Germany 129. It was difficult, though, to make direct comparisons, said Professor Sir Andrew Pollard, director of the Oxford Vaccine Group, because of variation in testing rates. “If you look across western Europe, we have about ten times more tests done each day than some other countries per head of population,” he told MPs. Hospital admissions and death rates are a more reliable comparison. The UK has two daily deaths per million people, compared with 0.5 in France and 0.7 in Germany.

Coronavirus cases fell again on Thursday, with 39,842 reported cases, meaning that the daily average is down 10 per cent week-on-week. Much of the caseload is among children.

For that reason, there might well be a “levelling off or falling” of cases in the next few weeks, said Professor John Edmunds, an epidemiologist at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine who sits on the advisory group Sage, after a surge driven by mixing in schools. “The epidemic in the last few months has been really driven by huge numbers of cases in children,” he told BBC Radio 4, “and that will eventually lead to high lev-



els of immunity.”

Pollard said: “When we look at the data it’s really important not to sort of bash the UK with a very high case rate because actually it’s partly related to very high testing. I’m not trying to deny that there’s not plenty of transmission, because there is, but it’s the comparisons that are problematic.”

However, European scientists, doctors and researchers are watching our free-wheeling party with a mixture of horror and inquisitiveness. “I feel amazed that during a pandemic, despite any scientific evidence, politicians [in the UK] can make such sensational mistakes, risking compromising health and the economy only to obtain consensus,” said **Nino Car-tabellotta**, president of Italy’s Group for Evidence-based Medicine.

Still, he continues, “The Italian population is exhausted. People can’t wait to leave the pandemic behind. The great part of the population, 80 per cent per cent, is vaccinated and I think they will adopt cautious behaviour.” Social distancing measures have been kept in place and masks remain mandatory indoors.

Back in Newcastle, Luke, 21, Phil, 22, and Scott, 22, students at Northumbria University, are sharing a tin of rolling tobacco and having a drink in Osborne Road. “It’s back to normal, we’re back raving,” Phil said. “There are still some signs about Covid in pubs, little reminders, but other than that, it’s back to how it used to be. End of the weirdness.”

In the town centre, a group on a Halloween bar crawl stagger through the streets – prisoners, policewomen, nurses, cowboys, a banana, and an angel wearing a tennis skirt that she keeps pulling up to flash her knickers.

Jack and Sally, both 18 from Sunderland, are out with their friend Zoe, 18,

from Carlisle. “I think I’ve been out every week this summer,” Zoe said. “I’ve been making the most of it, haven’t I?” Sally is drinking gin and lemonade in one glass, and a vodka coke in the other.

Zoe added: “I definitely think people are more flirty after coming out of lockdown, especially lads.”

Further south, in York, Gabrielle, 18, from near Toulouse, is visiting with her mother, Marie. Marie feels like she is on “a mask holiday”. In France they are obligatory on public transport and in areas with a seven-day infection rate of above 50 per 100,000 people. “It was very strange coming here,” Gabrielle said. “Restaurants were the most frightening thing for me because in France you wear masks in confined places.”

Alicia, 29, from Poland, is visiting York. “The restrictions here are very easy, not much social distancing,” she said. “It’s more relaxing. I’m one of those people who love to hug, love to be in a group of people, so it’s nice.”

In Flares, a nightclub in central Newcastle, Rebecca, 38, a nurse from Darlington, is enjoying the “escapism” of being away from her job and children for a night, here with her old university friend, Andrea, wearing sequins and drinking blue WKD. They are staying in a hotel, their first night out in Newcastle for two years. “It’s really weird coming from work at the hospital,” she said.

“I keep going to the hand sanitisers in here and loads are empty. You come out and you get permission to forget about it all, I suppose. We’re parents so it’s nice to be ourselves, without kids and jobs, glammed up after two years at home.”

**Women
drink
from a
bucket of
cocktails**

**We can
expect a
falling
off of
cases**





Women at Popworld in Newcastle make the most of some of the most lax hospitality rules in Europe. Above, Megan Agnew is encouraged to join the party



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