

Portrait of a Travelling Man

by Ruth Scott Philp

This article was originally published in 1986 in the Vancouver-based British Columbia Business Examiner. It was written by Ruth Scott Philp, a retired freelance writer and teacher of English and typing who had travelled widely, taking a number of escorted tours, including three with David Skillan.

When Rudyard Kipling wrote, “If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs/And blaming it on you,” he should have added, “Then you may have the qualities to become a successful tour manager.”

If you are an experienced tour manager, you not only keep your head, you also keep your sense of humour and your perspective. You know there may be surprises, but you are prepared to deal with them. You may find that the hotel you booked a year in advance has been overbooked; the restaurants you were prepared to recommend have folded; the weather has turned out to be unsuitable for the events you have scheduled. You smile, you give a Trudeau-like shrug, and you carry on.

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As one of a group of Canadians touring Australia and New Zealand, I felt fortunate in having as a tour leader a man who has been involved in the travel business all his adult life. After performing the military service demanded of young men in England at the time, David Skillan set off in the early 1960s to achieve a boyhood ambition to see the world, carrying a pack weighing forty pounds, and with fifty English pounds in his pocket.

The young adventurer attracted a fair amount of attention from the press. An article entitled “Twentieth-Century Phileas Fogg” likened him to Jules Verne’s fictional character, who went around the world in eighty days. Skillan’s initial journey lasted eighty months. He covered 500,000 miles and delved into strange, exotic lands and foreign cities, seeking employment to finance each stage of his marathon odyssey.

Another article called “Travelling Man” mentions that Skillan has used every mode of travel except a balloon. He does admit, however, that he once had to give up an interesting job because of a tendency to seasickness. That problem has now been overcome, but meanwhile he has flown with more than seventy-five airlines and worked in a dozen countries, including Japan, Thailand, Argentina, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand.

As we flew in comparative comfort over the Australian Outback, Skillan recalled how he had worked his way around this desolate stretch of country. He enjoys the relative luxury in which he now travels—riding a plane instead of hitching rides, eating in hotels rather than making meals out of cans or cooking over campfires, sleeping in comfortable beds instead of sleeping bags. As the comedian says, “I’ve been rich and I’ve been poor, and rich is better.” Still, Skillan never regrets the challenge and adventure of his early years of travel. Not only have they shaped him and made him the quintessential tour manager, they have also provided him with memories that most people cannot even imagine.



One writer described him as “the debonair fellow in the black turtleneck sweater.” Twenty years later, Skillan’s image has changed. Whether he wears a natty jacket in a colour bright enough to catch the eye of his tour group or the safari suit in which he appears very much at home, he stands out in a crowd. There is an air of confidence, of a man in command of himself and the situation. We knew him best in a short-sleeved shirt, a khaki vest, a neckerchief that was different every day, and the shorts and knee socks that appear suited to the land Down Under and that do much to show off a handsome pair of legs.

Skillan's trim frame carries no excess weight, which is not strange, as he is seldom still. The life of a tour manager is a busy one. On long-distance tours, with many departures and arrivals, he takes charge of all tickets, getting boarding passes and paying taxes, leaving tour members to relax or look around the airport. On arrival at each airport, he dashes outside to find the bus driver (or coach captain, in Australia), then directs everyone to the coach and does a head count.

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As we approached each hotel, he would make a last-minute announcement over the microphone, usually emphasizing something that he had mentioned earlier. It may have been "Early call at seven tomorrow morning. Bags out before breakfast. The coach leaves at eight-thirty." Or sometimes it was "Tomorrow is at leisure." He might then have described what we could see and give suggestions on what to do, where to eat, and where to shop. He likes to see that his people get the most for their money. Perhaps he remembers when he had to count his pennies.

When the day's work is over, David may be seen swimming in the pool or on the beach, striding over the countryside or along a city street, or running to snap just the right picture, which might turn up in a magazine illustrating one of his many articles. One might expect him to be blasé, but there is a youthful enthusiasm in his expressions of delight in a breathtaking sunset, a gorgeous valley nestled between volcanic hills, or even a lovely sunny day. "Aren't we lucky to have this weather?" is how he often greets a new day.

It takes a little while to get to know David Skillan. Under an insouciant façade, he hides a core of sensitivity and old-fashioned sentiment. He likes to joke and tease members of his group, but he senses if anybody is unhappy, and when someone is in difficulty he is helpful and sympathetic. His romantic nature becomes evident when he speaks of his meeting the beautiful Tokyo-born Yuriko, followed by a two-year courtship and a traditional Japanese wedding. He is now the proud father of two lovely daughters, Julie and Jane.

David Skillan is now a Canadian citizen, but his first few years here were perhaps nearly as difficult and challenging as his time spent wandering in foreign lands. In spite of a prepossessing appearance and obvious education, he had more than his share of problems and obstacles. It is a tribute to his perseverance and willingness to turn his hand to any kind of work that he has been able to parlay his love of travel and his interest in people into a successful career in the travel industry.

He leads an active life. Besides leading tours to Australia and New Zealand twice a year in conjunction with a Vancouver-based tour company, he organizes and conducts tours for his own company, Skillan's Tours and Travel. Under the name David Skillan Safaris, he specializes in East African wildlife safaris and tours to southern Africa. He also promotes and leads tours to Britain, South and Central America, and the Orient. When not on tour, he teaches travel and tourism courses at the British Columbia Institute of Technology.

David never forgets the friends he made on his early travels—the people who picked up the young wayfarer and sometimes offered him the hospitality of their homes. He has tried to give back some of this help to others and to people who have travelled with him.

As I watched him stand, feet braced on the deck of a steamer, gazing at the horizon, while on another tour with him in the Far East, I thought of the lines "Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes/He star'd at the Pacific." Perhaps this is just the romanticism in my own nature, but I felt that I would like to know what he was thinking and whether he wished himself back in the days when life was unpredictable and tomorrow always brought something unexpected. ➔

