

CONFESSIONS OF A TOUR LEADER

Anyone can manage? Don't believe it!

by David Skillan

This tongue-in-cheek article originally appeared in the travel pages of The Vancouver Sun in 1978. It is as valid today as it was then.

Funny how just about everyone thinks they can lead a tour. But have you ever wondered how you really *would* react if you were faced with up to 25 strangers whom you had to look after and live with for two or three weeks?

A former colleague of mine, well established in the marketing and promotional side of the travel business, always thought managing a tour was a piece of cake—until the opportunity of escorting one himself cropped up. Off he went, convinced of doing a masterly job. He duly returned, confident that the tour had been a success. Then the completed questionnaires came in, and his face fell. All were critical of the tour manager—him. Then the penny dropped. So busy had he been having a good time himself, he had unwittingly neglected the clients. A cardinal sin.

Prior to assignment, you delve into your flight bag, to ensure you haven't forgotten anything. You check your passport, to see that it's still valid and that your visas are in order, while your tender left arm confirms that you've had the necessary shots. Your small flag, useful in the crowds of India and Japan, is getting a bit tattered, but it will do for one more trip. You run through your manual, which contains relevant tour information, contact addresses, and company rules. You also check your first aid kit. (It's surprising how many people graze their knees while gazing at the sights!) You've got your Imodium tablets, not fancying another attack of Delhi Belly (elsewhere known as Montezuma's Revenge, Gypsy Tummy, or the Tanzania Trots), and your miniature brandy flask (for use in emergencies) is filled to the brim. You've also got your accommodation vouchers, airline tickets, Swiss army knife, flashlight, and needle and thread.

Armed to the teeth, you're ready for anything . . . or so you think. But your equipment doesn't cover all contingencies, and unusual problems occasionally create headaches.

Lost luggage is, for both client and tour manager, a pain in the neck. And, like anything else that goes wrong, it's all *your* fault. Take the incident involving a particularly difficult woman from New York, whose baggage was missing on arrival at Entebbe airport. The tour consisted of a two-week safari through Uganda and Zaire, a rather remote part of the world. Although I made exhaustive inquiries about the missing baggage during our 24-hour stay at the nearby exclusive Lake Victoria hotel, there was still no sign of the lost item when it was time to continue the trip. I assured the woman that everything possible was being done to retrieve her suitcase, but while I sympathized with her, I must admit that I didn't hold out much hope.

For the next two weeks, I led a dog's life, as this woman descended on me every opportunity she got. "Where's my baggage? Why hasn't it turned up? Why aren't you doing more?" As if I could pursue it, with no access to a telephone and miles from anywhere. It reached the stage where I dreaded facing her. But guess what? On our return to Entebbe airport, her baggage was waiting for her, intact. It had been delivered on another flight the day after our departure.

An ex-hospital matron, and a military one at that, once created a fuss on another tour through South America. At one place, our hotel had obviously seen better days, and when the matron saw her somewhat dingy room, she threw up her hands and exclaimed, "Under no circumstances am I sleeping in there!" Despite my pleas that "It's only for one night!" she stood her ground—all 200 pounds of her. Fortunately, where there's a will, there's a way. She, of course, ended up in my room, while I occupied hers.

Another time, in Istanbul, two male members of my group wanted a night on the town. Naturally, they turned to me. What would you do? It's your first time there too, but as the "knowledgeable" host, you don't let on. Neither can you let the clients down. A taxi ride later, you're surrounded by nightclubs, but haven't a clue which one to choose. Apprehensively, you settle for the nearest and keep your fingers tightly crossed. No sooner do you all step

inside than, by sheer luck, a belly dancer links arms with your companions and shows off the jewel in her navel. Two hours later, you arrive back at the hotel, sighing with relief and smiling to yourself as you overhear one friend saying to the other, “What did I tell you? It’s always best to go with someone who knows.”

The majority of your clients are considerate, understanding, and appreciative. But there are exceptions. Such as the control freaks, who want to organize everything and everybody. The demanding ones, who want more than they paid for. The retired executives, who can’t let go and want to take over the show. And, of course, the ones who buttonhole you, no matter how busy you are, every time you meet.

There’s no retirement age for tour managers, but I know at least two who became alcoholics and one who became a nervous wreck. Speaking for myself, I love the work. I just wish I could get rid of this peculiar twitch . . .

UPDATE

These days, when you depart on tour, as well as taking your Swiss army knife, a good book to pass the time in airports, yogurt and ginger capsules to prevent tummy upsets, and Metamucil pills for constipation, you wear your Stuart Granger-style bush jacket or safari vest with many handy pockets, Ironman watch, Serengeti sunglasses, and super-comfy Hushpuppies. Everything else is neatly packed in transparent plastic bags in your tough-as-rhino-hide Samsonite suitcase. Oh, yes, you also carry a camcorder and a digital camera, to record each journey for posterity, and not one but two passports (Canadian and British), so that— should the need arise—you can call on two great nations for assistance.

It was March of 1970 when I escorted my first overseas tour, a group of Brits from London to the World’s Fair in Osaka, Japan, via India and the Far East. Fortunately, it was a great success, and I have been involved in the travel industry in one capacity or another—organizing, promoting, and escorting tours, teaching tourism and tour-guiding classes, hosting travel presentations, writing articles, publishing newsletters, and producing videos—ever since. ~DS



Me and some of my globetrotting clients in South Africa.