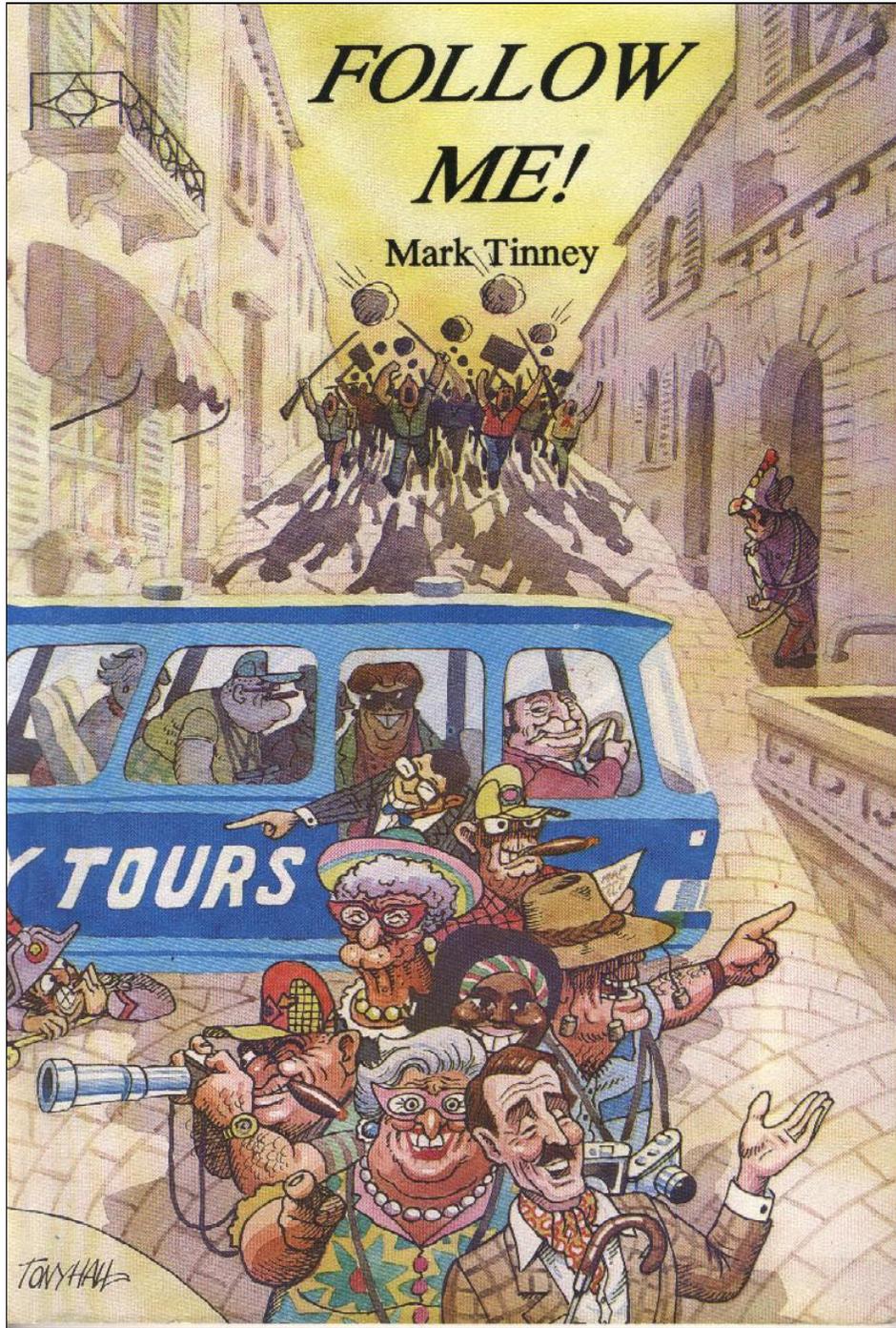


FOLLOW ME!

Mark Tinney



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Mark Tinney in his first year of tour directing in 1976

FOLLOW ME

WE ARE A LEADING TOUR OPERATOR AND ARE LOOKING FOR MORE TOUR MANAGERS

to lead our American, Canadian and Australian tourist groups on European trips. Our tour managers are friendly and outgoing men and women who are always there when something is happening, always on the road with interesting people. They live in good hotels and move in an international atmosphere. If you like to travel, are a good conversationalist, self-confident and mature, then get in touch with us, even if you have never before worked as a tour manager and even if you have not travelled much. We will show you how it's done. If you speak fluent English, are between 23 and 45 years old and have good education, then you should send a recent photo, together with your career details and application to the address below.

It was early in 1976 and I had been living in the Bavarian capital, Munich, in southern Germany, for nearly two years. Much of that time had been spent working in the computer department of the Bank of America and I was ready for a change. So was the Bank of America. They had made a brave decision to take me on in the first place, since I had no computer experience, and their initial reservations had been fully justified. Wherever my talents lay, they certainly did not lie in that field. The question was what to do next? The advert in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Munich's main newspaper, looked at least interesting.

I wrote off an application, half expecting to hear nothing more; but a few days later, a reply did come, from a Mr Liedermann, asking me to an interview at the Munich Hilton.

Mr Liedermann was a tanned, silver-haired man who spoke with a strong American accent. It was a few minutes into the interview discussion before I realized that he was not American but German. The manner was friendly; but there was no time wasted. I was invited to talk about myself and my career to date, and to explain what I felt made me suitable for the work. Since I had only the vaguest idea of what the work entailed, this was difficult, made more so by Mr Liedermann switching without warning to German and then to French and expecting me to do the same.

After ten minutes of this, he sat back in his chair and smiled. "Good. You come across well. Your German is excellent, your French is lousy and your Italian is non-existent. You will have to learn Italian, Mr Tinney. But your manner is friendly and you of course speak perfect English, which is the language of our clients. I tell you frankly that a candidate succeeds or fails when he comes through that door. If you make a good initial impression on me, you will with the clients. We can offer you a place on our training tour; but no doubt you have some questions which you would like to ask."

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I was so surprised at this decisiveness and the speed of events that all the questions I had mentally prepared refused to surface. Mr Liedermann was apparently used to this reaction and speedily terminated the interview by thanking me for coming and by emphasizing that the written offer, together with details of the training tour, would be posted to me the following day.

That afternoon, I handed in my notice at the bank. With unused holiday allocation deducted from the normal notice period, I was free in a few days and was looking forward with a mixture of excitement and nervousness to a completely different way of life.

The beginning of the training seminar was held in Lugano. On the first morning, eighty of us gathered in the conference room of a large, old-fashioned and very Swiss hotel on the shore of the lake and sized each other up. Men and women were about equally represented, ranging in age from what I guessed was early twenties up to a man who looked as though he could be in his late nineties. He turned out to be barely fifty; but life had obviously dealt him a few rough hands, although he never did enlighten us about his past.

Mr Liedermann entered the room and mounted the rostrum, followed by a colleague whom he introduced as Mrs Nischer. They both smiled at us.

“Ladies and gentlemen, Mrs Nischer and I would like to welcome you all. For the next seven days, we shall be working hard together until you have a thorough grounding in our business and understand what is expected of tour managers and how you can achieve our expectations and our standards.”

He indicated that we should turn to the copy of the week’s timetable with which we had been issued and proceeded to explain it in depth.

After spending another day in Lugano, we were to take two coaches and drive through Italy, overnighting in Venice, Rome and Florence and with a full-day excursion to the Isle of Capri. On the way, we would have to practise being tour managers, from giving speeches on the microphone to checking the group into hotels and arranging meals.

“Very few of you have been involved in tourism before; but we have chosen you because we think you can do the job. We know that you are educated and intelligent and believe that you are also attractive personalities. We know also that eighty attractive and intelligent men and women together may be a little distracting for some of you.”

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He permitted himself the briefest of smiles. "But remember, you are here to work. This is not a holiday. Holidays do not arrive for you until the winter. By then you will deserve them. Now, I shall call your names and you will each stand up, introduce yourselves and give a brief account of your career to date, in English, which is the only language you are permitted use throughout the week."

It was an interesting hour, as one candidate after another stood up. Dutch, Germans, Austrians and British were there in strength, together with a smattering of Swiss, French, Americans and Australians. The quality of English was high; but it was obvious that some candidates were very nervous.

One, an Englishman, announced that he was an escaped vicar. This drew loud laughter and applause from the British contingent and puzzled looks from many of the continentals. Stammering, he corrected himself. He had meant to say, vintner. It was no good. Thereafter, he was known as The Reverend.

In fact, there was an extraordinary diversity of background. Apart from university students and those who were studying elsewhere, one found ski-instructors, sailors, journalists, writers, teachers, bankers, gardeners, entrepreneurs and several whose description of their past was so vague that we amused ourselves later by speculating what exactly they had been doing.

We were all united by one thing – a sense of adventure. Many had come on the training tour with no clear idea of the job and were prepared to leave immediately if they did not like what they found. Others looked upon it as an interesting interval between university and career; very few, if any, thought of tour managing as a career in itself and, in the mid-1970s, few tour companies thought that way either. Only a decade later did the idea of a career structure begin to evolve in the more far-sighted companies, whose tour managers were encouraged to look on their positions as permanent.

This was all in the future. Right now, we were happy to study; but also determined to enjoy ourselves. A week in Italy, for many of us the first time there, would provide all the opportunity we needed.

For northern Europeans, Italy exuded an aura of good-humoured and intriguing chaos and decadence. To those brought up in rigidly organized societies where bureaucracy is efficient and success in life is founded on the logic of qualification, study and hard work, the first sight of Italian cities, filled at any time of day with thousands of Italians, who apparently have nothing better to do than drink coffee or shop for beautiful clothes, is a severe shock. It is as if science has suddenly discovered that the earth is flat after all and that one's concept of reality has to be entirely rebuilt.

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As Italy becomes more familiar, it is clear that Italians do work and that many of them work very hard; but work also includes going for a coffee and shopping for beautiful clothes. For an Italian, to be without family and friends is as close as possible to be dead without actually reaching that state. No Italian is stupid enough to sit in the office drinking coffee with a colleague, when both of them could be enjoying it so much more in the little bar across the road. They are still talking about business; but here they can also talk about their families and help solve each other's domestic problems.

That wonderfully cynical saying among Italian bureaucrats, "With friends we interpret the law, with others we apply it," is valid everywhere in Italian life. Italians shudder at the idea of being isolated, not only because their gregarious spirits would wither like vines without water; but because they would be helpless in a land where friends are needed to survive the daily clash with chaotic government.

For any Italian who has even a few Lire to spare, *La Bella Figura* is almost as important as family and friends. Italy, above all European countries, is the one where the packaging counts as much as or more than the contents. Whether the packaging contains a house, a car or an Italian, makes no difference. It has to be tasteful, stylish, and exquisite. No matter if you bankrupt yourself in the process, you will be forgiven for that. But let it be seen that you lack generosity of spirit and you will count for nothing, whatever the state of your bank balance.

The average Italian has a grace and charm, which are conspicuously absent in some of those nations north of the Alps. When you dine at a hotel in Italy as a tour manager, the head waiter will make sure you are looked after well.

"You would like another bottle of wine? Certainly. You have some friends visiting whom you would like to invite to dinner? Of course. It's a pleasure."

All that is expected is that you tip well. Then everyone is happy. You and your friends have enjoyed an excellent dinner and the waiters are a little bit wealthier. What about the owner? He is happy too. The extra food and drink cost next to nothing in comparison with what his hotel earns from your tour company and he has contented staff. Suggest that policy to the average German or Swiss hotel proprietor and he will at the very least suffer a sleepless night and quite possibly severe palpitations. In Germany and Switzerland, you can have whatever you want provided you pay for it, and the price is clearly marked on the menu.

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One of the great joys I later experienced during my career as tour manager, was spending time alternately north and south of the Alps, travelling from countries where everything worked because of respect for authority to one where everything worked despite utter contempt for it; from countries where daily life was safe, comfortable and predictable and spontaneity was regarded with suspicion, to one where nothing could be predicted and safety and comfort depended purely on one's talent for persuading others that their interests lay in serving your interests. Two weeks in either place and you were ready, indeed desperate, for its opposite.

On the training tour, few of us spoke Italian; but, just like our future clients, we were protected from the consequences of this ignorance by being part of a group, looked after by people who knew what they were doing and who spoke the language perfectly.

Everything worked smoothly from the minute we boarded the two Italian touring coaches in Lugano and crossed over the frontier at Chiasso. We would undoubtedly have had marvellous fun if we had not been completely absorbed trying to record everything Mr Liedermann and Mrs Nischer were telling us. The stream of information never stopped. It was ominously clear that this work was a lot more complicated than sitting at the front of the coach and looking forward to the next meal.

From what one could gather, it was easy enough though, if you were an accomplished actor, entertainer, accountant, psychologist, map-reader, historian, statistician, diplomat and leader of men who could conduct conversations simultaneously in four languages with hysterical clients, aggressive policemen, villainous street traders, and taxi drivers. The ability to exist on five hours sleep a night and a digestive system as rugged and efficient as a diesel engine would also come in handy.

“Remember,” said Mr Liedermann, looking at us intently as we swept along the *autostrada*, “that for the clients, you are the company. Our reputation rests on you. You are paid to resolve problems whenever they occur. We must say that, having run tours since 1928, we have the experience to ensure that you have very few problems; but some things are outside our control. Illness, coach breakdowns, natural catastrophes, strikes, civil unrest – you will face at least some of these from time to time.”

He grinned. “I can see you think the last one is very unlikely. Let me tell you a story. It was in Rome during the height of the strikes and student riots, not long ago. One of our most experienced tour managers was taking his group to Tivoli Gardens outside the city. Driving through the city centre, they turned a corner and saw a huge crowd coming towards them, completely filling the road and the

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sidewalks. The tour manager turned to the driver, just in time to see him fling open the door, leap down on to the road and run away. Great. There he is, alone with forty clients and a few hundred demonstrators about to surround the bus. Now it gets even more exciting. He suddenly realizes why the driver vanished – some of the demonstrators at the front are carrying handguns. One comes up to the window and demands to be let in, so the tour manager has to open the door. The gunman climbs aboard, puts the gun to the side of the tour manager's head and says,

'Move the bus across the road. We're going to use it as a barrier against the police.'

"Meanwhile, the clients at the back of the bus haven't seen what's going on at the front and are busy taking photographs out of the window. The gunman notices this and threatens to shoot them. The coach can't be moved because the driver has taken the key and when the gunman understands this, he gets even more agitated, as does everyone else. Just as the tour manager is resigning himself to being shot, an accomplice shouts at the gunman to get off the bus right away because the *carabinieri* are approaching with machine guns. He takes the advice, jumps off and vanishes into the crowd, which starts to run away. A couple of minutes later, the driver reappears and, as you can imagine, is left in no doubt what the tour manager thinks of him. Gradually, the clients start to come out of shock and they all decide to continue to Tivoli. Five minutes later, around another corner, they see the same bunch of demonstrators heading towards them once more."

'Back up and turn round!' screams the tour manager.

'I can't!' shouts the driver. 'There's a car behind us!'

"It was a Fiat 500, the smallest car on the road. The tour manager finally loses his self-control. 'Are you crazy? Do you want to get shot? Back up!'"

"So the driver does. The Fiat driver can't believe what's happening until his car is banged up against a brick wall. At that point, he decides to get out and watches, completely rigid with terror, until the Fiat is no more than a two metres long. The coach finally makes the turn and they escape. When they reach Tivoli, everyone gets drunk very fast. The driver and tour manager are later arrested for dangerous driving and failure to report an accident. But remember, this is Italy. After a lot of explanation and phone calls to friends and lawyers, it's all sorted out."

It was a great story. The problem was it was true. We were a thoughtful group for the rest of the day. There was definitely more to tour managing than we had expected.

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Venice lightened our mood. We were all excited by the city, its canals and buildings, its history, its spirit. Even many years later the excitement is still there for me, less dramatic, but more deeply rooted now that I know it better. We arrived at lunchtime, ate at the hotel and immediately afterwards were taken by boat to St Mark's Square for the sightseeing tour.

Mario, the local guide for our group, was young, informative and fun. In two hours, he showed us much more than we could remember and illustrated just how valuable a good local guide could be.

After dinner, the famous Gondola Serenade was laid on. It is easy to dismiss it as just another tourist trap, and certainly it is an entertainment one would not like to repeat frequently; but there was something magical about it that evening. We glided through the canals and listened to the echoing footsteps of Venetians, hidden in the shadows of the alleyways and courtyards.

The singer and accordion player in one of the gondolas ran through their repertoire of songs and sang them well. Listening to those melodies, surrounded by the mysterious, surreal spirit of the place, I experienced a strange sensation of soaring away from my own century. Time ceased, for a short while, to have any meaning, because everything was as it had been for twenty generations.

The feeling vanished with as little warning as it had appeared, and I was a trainee tour manager again, contemplating the next day's drive to Rome and the certainty that we would have to give a talk on the microphone.

Using a microphone properly is an art and it soon became apparent that it was an art hardly any of us had mastered. For the British contingent at least, there was no language problem; but for some of the other trainees, the shock of hearing their own voice on the PA system and the effort of giving a lecture on an unfamiliar subject by grappling with a vocabulary of words seldom used or heard, had the effect of drying them up in mid-sentence, to their embarrassment and to the alarm of those still waiting for their turn.

Mr Liedermann was sympathetic but remorseless in his evaluations and it was clear that there would have to be major improvements before he was satisfied. By that time, a few trainees were considering giving up; but most of us were becoming more enthusiastic, as the scope and interest of the job became clearer.

Rome confirmed us in our enthusiasm. Any company which actually paid us to come every two or three weeks to this

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extraordinary, noisy, chaotic and exhilarating city, was worth working for.

You could see the atmosphere of anarchic vitality affecting the whole group. For the Italian trainees of course, this was no surprise. Wherever they came from in Italy, they all knew what to expect of Rome; but the effect on some of the northerners was dramatic. It was like watching life suddenly blossom in the Arctic spring. Where once there had been silence and slumber, there was suddenly colour, growth, and activity.

One trainee, a Swiss from Appenzell, called Rolf, announced he was going to call his girl-friend from the hotel. Considering hotel rates, this was an unusual extravagance for him, although, like any good Swiss, he was of course going to wait until the evening to get the cheap tariff. He happened to mention this to Gertrude.

Some people are born to sweep majestically through life in first class. Gertrude was one of them. A hundred and eighty pounds, five foot eleven, topped by a mass of blond curls and given to wearing figure-hugging black leather, she was not a woman one could easily ignore. Anyway, nobody would have dared.

Gertrude fixed Rolf with a stern and regal gaze and he began to shift uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

“How can you imagine to phone your lover in such a manner? If you were my lover, I would kill you. Now darling, I am going to get a bottle of good champagne and you are going to come to my room and we are going to drink it. Just the two of us. Then you phone your lover.”

There was no argument. In minutes, a bottle of Heidsieck was produced. I wondered later if Gertrude carried a supply in one of her seven suitcases. The bottle was duly plunged into a bucket of ice and carried by an obedient Rolf into the elevator. We did not see them again for two hours. Rolf looked as though he had undergone some catalytic experience, which would change his whole life. Gertrude merely smiled an inscrutable smile and ordered another bottle of champagne. We never did find out if Rolf got through to his girl-friend.

There were three nights in Rome and one whole day was taken up with an excursion to the Isle of Capri. Like other such islands, Capri had suffered because of its fame. For years, many thousands of tourists had strained the infrastructure until the old way of life had changed irrevocably for the worse.

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The island's economy relied absolutely on tourism and everything that stood in the way of its development was altered or removed. In the remoter parts, there were still traces of the beauty and serenity so vividly captured by Dr Axel Munthe in his book, "The Story of San Michel" but that old Swedish doctor would cry, I think, if he were to return now.

The next day, we stayed at the hotel for a seminar. It was hard work and we were all ready for the evening's entertainment, which had been laid on for us at Tivoli Gardens, twenty-five miles east of Rome.

It should have been obvious that we were still being tested to see how we behaved ourselves socially; but we had been studying and working for six days, we had started to make friends, we were in Rome, it was springtime and there were eighty of us – forty boys and forty girls. In the restaurant, on the hill overlooking Tivoli, musicians strolled and sang; on the tables there was wine and the owner announced we could have as much as we liked. Under those circumstances, even Trappist monks would have livened up a bit. We were not Trappist monks.

An Englishman, Adrian Lovelace, had a birthday and his table set the pace. I still have a vivid memory of one of his drinking companions, also an Englishman, dancing with a tall and willowy Austrian girl. He was very short and was trying to clutch her in a tight embrace. She objected, principally because, clamped in his teeth, he had a large cigar, which seemed to be resting in the V of her cleavage. At the neighbouring table, Mr Liedermann and Mrs Nischer were unamused and we got the feeling, subsequently proved correct, that this particular Englishman would not be conducting any tours.

It was the visit to the gardens of Tivoli that finished off most of the borderline cases. Unused to strong red wine, especially when mixed with cool evening air, they tried with pathetic concentration, and conspicuous lack of success, to negotiate the numerous terraces as we were led by our guide from one group of fountains to the next. Adrian Lovelace, one foot carefully following the other, made it as far as the ironically named *Fountain of Youth* before admitting defeat and retreating unsteadily to the café in the square of the Villa d'Este, where he ordered a bucket of black coffee.

The ride back to Rome was uneventful, because most of us were asleep. We paid for our excesses next day of course, not just with appalling hangovers, but because Mr Liedermann kept us working without a pause all the way to Florence. He had calmed down by then; but had made it clear that Tivoli was going to be our one and only lapse or else.....

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I can remember but little of Florence on that trip, although subsequently it became a favourite city. By then we were all tired and feeling the strain of constant study. Tivoli had merely accelerated the process.

The tour ended where it had begun, in Lugano. We wrote a brief examination to test our knowledge of administration and then the first tour allocations were read out. Together with some twenty other trainees, I was given a tour starting two weeks later, whilst the remainder of the group, with a few exceptions, received tours within the following month.

The next two weeks were taken up with preparations – buying guide books and maps, going over the itinerary and trying to memorize facts, not just on each city to be visited but on the countries themselves. It was a tense time. What would the group be like? I knew there would be forty-seven of them, from North America and Australia; but that did not tell me much, and the trip was going to be 21 days, from London to Sorrento and back, so there would be plenty of opportunity for mistakes.

Would the driver know his way around? I could read a map without difficulty; but not whilst giving a commentary at the same time. Would the clients know I was on my first tour and, if they found out, would they mind? All my new colleagues, whether they admitted it or not, were feeling similar misgivings, naturally enough in the circumstances; but nonetheless disturbing.

I need not have worried. From the moment I collected them at the airport, the tour members showed they were out to enjoy themselves. Even my inexperienced eye could see they made a good group – boisterous, positive and sensible.

The one fear at the back of my mind, as we left London for the journey to the Dover-Ostend ferry, was that my driver on the continent would be new. We had already been told there were not enough experienced drivers to go round, in what was turning out to be an exceptionally busy season, and I could visualize three weeks of hell as we blundered around the highways of Europe.

The crossing provided an opportunity to get to know the group better, since our time in London had been packed with activity. They were certainly congenial and also interested in me.

The most frequent question was, “How long have you been doing this job, Mark?”

“Three days.” That is what I would have said if I had been absolutely truthful. But since truth in this case, was not going to inspire very much confidence, I lied a little.

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“This is my first trip with this company; but of course I’ve done a lot of tours before this around Europe.”

This seemed to satisfy them and I had indeed seen a lot of Europe, although with friends and not on any tours.

In Ostend, there was a Belgian coach waiting. The driver was in his late thirties. “Hello, my name is Gilbert. Is this your first tour?”

“Yes. Is this yours?”

He laughed. “I’m starting my eighth season, so don’t worry. I know all the roads and all the hotels. You’re English, aren’t you? Good! At least you won’t have any problems with the language. O.K. Let’s get the suitcases loaded and then we can get going to Brussels.”

His English was good and, as a Fleming, he also had a fair command of German, together with reasonable French. Italian turned out to be adequate as well. At least we could talk on the coach in privacy.

I could not have been luckier. Gilbert was as good as his word and not once in three weeks did we come anywhere near getting lost. I could rely on him to warn me about things to mention along the route; he looked after the suitcases, drove safely, kept the coach spotless and, every evening at dinner, commented on the day and gave numerous and helpful suggestions. With all the background work in safe hands, I could concentrate on the microphone and looking after the clients.

There is no substitute for an experienced and intelligent driver. No matter how many years you have been sitting in the tour manager’s seat, you appreciate the chance to get on with your own job without map-reading, checking luggage, making sure the coach is clean, controlling the diesel and explaining every detail of the itinerary until you are sure it is understood. Regardless of how good a new driver may be potentially, he needs time to learn and you are the one who has to teach him.

The first few days of the tour sped by – Brussels, Amsterdam, Frankfurt – with only one night in each place. For the tourist, there was fascination in each city; but Amsterdam was the group’s favourite. Its cosmopolitan flavour, vivacity and history, together with a character which reflected so much of the easy-going friendliness of the Dutch people, left everyone contented and sorry only that they could not stay longer to explore more of the country.

By the time we arrived in Lucerne, the tour members were behaving like old friends. This was our first two-night stay and we all took the chance to slow up. That meant we had a wake-up call at 7.00 a.m. instead of 6.00 a.m., followed by a leisurely breakfast.

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However slowly you eat though, you cannot make a hard roll and a croissant last very long.

The brief city tour was followed by an excursion to Mount Pilatus. The weather was sunny, clear and warm – perfect for the trip. When we reached the summit by cable-car, there were loud shouts of excitement as the Australians noticed winter snow still hanging around. They dived into it, hurling snowballs at each other and at complete strangers. Even by the extroverted standards of their fellow countrymen, they seemed exuberant, until Alf, the oldest one at seventy-eight, told me he and several others had never seen snow before.

Switzerland amazed and intrigued everyone and not just because of the Alpine scenery. The orderliness, great wealth evident everywhere and the polite formality of the Swiss, provoked endless comments, particularly from the Californians, coming as they did from a state where informality was almost a religion and the dazzling smile a necessity in everyday life.

Some months later, on my first tour to the Soviet Union, the Intourist guide made a very interesting observation about the smile.

“We are always suspicious if we are smiled at by those we don’t know, because we are taught not to waste a smile on a stranger. To smile at such a time is to imply you are weaker than the other person.”

This aspect of the Soviet character was eloquently summed up by a foreign diplomat, describing Yuri Andropov, the one-time head of the KGB. “His smile,” said the diplomat, “was like the glint of moonlight on the brass handle of a coffin.”

By comparison with Mr Andropov, the Swiss are cuddly and demonstrative extroverts; but they are undoubtedly wary of outsiders and inclined to be distant until they get to know them better. Considering the problems the Swiss have had with foreigners over the last thousand years, their reaction is understandable.

There is another reason for their introversion, resilience and hardiness – the alpine climate. Until the industrial revolution transformed everything, life in the mountains was harsh, poor and precarious. Once a means of survival had been discovered, there was no incentive to change it. Even without the added dangers of foreign aggression therefore, conservatism, toughness and thrift would have bred themselves into the Swiss people.

If these qualities had been absent, the Swiss would not have created one of the world’s richest countries out of a mountainous,

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inhospitable land, almost devoid of all the natural resources enjoyed by luckier nations.

Leaving Lucerne the next morning, we drove through Liechtenstein and down the Arlberg Pass to Innsbruck – our last night in a German-speaking country. Over the Brenner, lay the South Tyrol, formerly Austrian; annexed by Italy after the First World War. The Brenner was an important political frontier; but there was a more important though unmarked border a few miles south of that, as one left the South Tyrol behind and entered the great plain of northern Italy.

This second frontier was the historical boundary between the Germanic and Latin races in Europe, between races whose differences in culture and world outlook had instilled a mixture of admiration, contempt and puzzlement in their relations with each other for the last two thousand years.

As we left the mountains of the southern Tyrol behind us, the last traces of Germanic influence petered out. Miles of vineyards and cereal crops replaced alpine pastures and farmhouses. Shallow-pitched roofs, decked with heavy, deeply curved tiles, protected the old houses, many of which looked neglected and in disrepair.

Throughout Italy, one can see such places, both in the countryside and in the towns. But fading paint and peeling plaster are no indication of lack of money, as they would be in Germanic Europe. For Italians, the interior of the house seems to be far more important. In Venice and Rome and many other lesser cities, one can gaze through windows of ancient, crumbling palaces and be amazed at the splendour of the furnishings that lie within. Considering the care which is lavished on clothes as a symbol of wealth, this indifference towards house exteriors seems a curious contradiction. Nonetheless, it exists.

In Venice, I met Ineke, who had been on the same training tour. Like me, she was on her first trip; but was not enjoying so much luck with her driver, who was himself very new.

A few days before, they had arrived in Frankfurt and had tried but failed to find the hotel. Ineke had then done the obvious thing and stopped at a taxi rank to ask the way. As a Dutch woman, her German was excellent; but the route to the hotel seemed so complicated, she decided to pay for the cab to lead them there. The driver refused to go empty, but insisted that she stay with him. Back to the coach to explain what was happening to her already nervous driver, who spoke not one word of German, and then into the taxi and through the rush-hour traffic.

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They arrived at the hotel ten minutes later and Ineke hurried to reception to check in. Nervous herself by this time, she rushed through the room allocations and then asked for dinner to be served punctually at 8 o'clock.

“Certainly,” replied the desk clerk, “but it’s already 7.30. Won’t your people want a bit of time to go to their rooms when they arrive?”

“They’re already here; the coach is out.....” Ineke turned around to indicate the coach in the forecourt and paused in mid-sentence, for there was no coach. “Oh, my God!”

Considering that this was her first tour and she had just lost an entire coach load of clients, Ineke acted with remarkable restraint. What could she do? Not a lot, except to ponder the untimely end of a promising career. Ten minutes went past, fifteen, twenty. By this time, Ineke had already mentally composed her letter of resignation; but her thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the wailing of a police siren. It was coming closer; a police car, its blue light flashing, swept into the forecourt and braked to a halt. Thirty yards behind it was the coach. The two policemen were smiling broadly.

“Are you the tour manager of that group?”

Ineke admitted she was and then listened as the policemen explained its disappearance and miraculous recovery. The driver had followed the wrong taxi and had ended up in a narrow one-way street, with no room to go forward and a long line of impatient, hooting motorists behind him. Someone had telephoned the police and these two officers had sorted out the chaos. The clients all thought it a huge joke and insisted on standing drinks for Ineke and the driver, which they gratefully and immediately accepted.

The next day, our group headed south for Florence and another one-night stop. Half a day’s sightseeing is certainly not enough to do justice to that city; but that was all the itinerary could allow. I thought then that we should have had more free time there; but over the years, I came to realize most clients wanted to see as much as possible, even if it meant taking a tour lacking in depth.

Tour operators that offer general tours of Europe know that the fastest trips are the ones that sell best. There will always be itineraries catering for special interests and covering only a limited region; but for most clients, visiting Europe for the first and maybe the last time, there is little incentive to wander around on their own, as they have neither the language nor the knowledge of locality and geography to utilise their spare hours efficiently.

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Florence attracted millions of tourists every year because of its historical and artistic importance. Finally, the daily overcrowding in the summer months persuaded the city authorities to close the centre to all heavy traffic and nowadays tour groups have to take walking tours. The foundations of the old buildings no longer suffer from vibration damage and the quality of the air has greatly improved.

On a continent where cities and towns have existed for hundreds or thousands of years before the invention of the internal combustion engine, local authorities everywhere are trying with varying degrees of success, to weigh the preservation of their heritage against the financial advantages of mass tourism. Tourism often wins because all governments are well aware of the amount of profit and therefore tax income involved in what, since the 1960s, has become one of the world's great industries. So long as air travel continues to get cheaper relative to average incomes, there seems no end to tourism's potential expansion.

The group was fascinated by Florence; but overwhelmed by Rome. The noise generated by Romans going about their normal business was incredible to any American or Australian tourist from some small agricultural town. Even the New Yorkers were impressed by Rome's traffic chaos and the absolute refusal of Roman drivers to give way to anyone. As the local guide said, "Whenever you buy a second-hand car here, don't bother to check the brakes. They're never used; but give the horn a good going-over."

The stay in Rome passed uneventfully, except for one incident. On the first evening, in a street near the Trevi Fountain, a young Roman villain grabbed the shoulder bag of one of our Australian women and tried to wrench it away from her. It was a bad mistake on his part. Norma was in her sixties; but she was tough. She had grown up on a sheep station and was used to looking after herself. Holding firmly on to the bag, she let the thief pull away a little and then dropped him with a vicious, flicking kick right between the legs.

"Don't bother to call the police. He's learnt his lesson for the night," observed Norma, as her victim staggered groaning to his feet and limped away. Since then, I have met lots of Australian Normas and Normans, friendly, extroverted, resilient and hard. German military historians maintain that in both world wars, the Australians provided some of the finest assault troops on the Allied side. If they were anything like Norma, I can believe it.

The group survived Rome intact and still full of energy. Twenty-four hours later, they were unleashed on Capri. The local guide, Enrico, caught their mood immediately.

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“Remember, ladies and gentlemen, that here we do not line up because we would never get anywhere. Instead, we charge!” A chorus of approving guffaws greeted this announcement.

“You are ready? Follow me!” roared Enrico, as the group surged after him to the entrance of the funicular railway to the top of the island. Like a phalanx of Greek pikemen they smashed their way through ranks of bewildered tourists and took over the train. Enrico was ecstatic.

“Wonderful! Wonderful! I make you all honorary Italians!”

Three hours later, we were ready to return to the mainland. The group had had a great time and was sorry to say goodbye to the island, although it is doubtful that the feeling was reciprocated.

There were only six days left of our tour and each of them was filled with interest and fun. With Gilbert in the background, I suffered no nasty surprises, and even had time to absorb a few primitive phrases of Italian. The sun shone all the time (in 1976, the sun shone in Europe without a break until September); tour members were contented – in fact, the trip was one of those that tour managers dream about. Sorrento, Pisa, Nice, Grenoble and Paris provided everything that had been expected and more.

We said goodbye to each other at Charles de Gaulle Airport. It was a truly sad parting and I still remember them all.

For me, that summer of 1976 provided both elation and exhaustion. The great cities of Western Europe became familiar places, as did many of the minor towns. New friendships were made and new languages were at least explored and rudimentary vocabularies mastered.

National histories and prejudices started to make sense as they were traced back to the empires of Greece and Rome. Europe was now an integrated whole in my mind, instead of a collection of alien, puzzling states. The exhaustion came from nightly study of guide books, maps, instruction manuals, newspapers and itineraries. There was no short cut to learning it all; it had to be examined, understood and practised before it was finally lodged safely in the memory. Looking back at the mistakes made in virtually every aspect of my work, I am surprised I survived.

This was partly due to good fortune. On the first five tours, the drivers were all experienced. Only on the sixth tour did a new driver appear and by then it did not matter too much, although I certainly noticed the strain. There were no walks down the aisle of the coach to talk to the tour members, secure in the knowledge that we would

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arrive in time at our destination. I spent most of the trip riveted to the front seat, carefully searching for the next road sign. In the cities it was far more difficult – a moment's inattention could mean a turning missed and a nervous ride through unknown suburbs.

In September, the office decided to send me to the Soviet Union for the last tour of the season. In those days, with the Cold War still creating mutual suspicion in East-West relations, the Soviet Union was at once mysterious, alarming and fascinating.

The tour actually began in Copenhagen and travelled through southern Scandinavia to reach the Soviet Union from Finland. After seven nights all together in Leningrad, Novgorod, Moscow, Smolensk and Minsk, we were to drive into Poland and thence to East Germany, finishing with two nights in West Berlin.

“You’ll find,” a colleague, Peter, told me, before the trip began, “that clients on Russian tours are older and they’re usually experienced travellers, because no-one picks Russia for their first foreign tour. And they won’t complain about lack of comfort. That’s what they expect. They will probably complain about the food though. It’s normally inedible and sometime uneatable.”

“How do you survive?” I enquired.

“Bread, caviar and Georgian champagne. The bread’s pretty good; you can buy big tins of caviar from the waiters and the champagne’s always cold. Anyway, you’ve only got seven nights there. You’ll manage.”

A diet of caviar and champagne? It sounded as if I was going to enjoy the food after all. But what about hotels, guides, bureaucracy, border crossings, bus travel?

“Don’t worry about a thing. You’ve got Willy as a driver. He’s been doing Russia for ten years; he knows more about it than the Russian guides do. He’ll look after you.”

Two days later, I stepped off an SAS flight at Copenhagen’s airport and took a taxi to the Palace Hotel, located in the main square, opposite the entrance to the famous Tivoli Gardens. The Palace was elegantly gloomy and some of the guests seemed to have absorbed the atmosphere. It may have had something to do with the prices at the bar, which were high enough to make anybody gloomy. For the price of a beer, you could buy two gallons of gasoline for your car.

Over the next two days, I discovered that throughout Scandinavia, alcohol was extraordinarily expensive. The puritanical streak in the Scandinavian nature ensured that drink taxes remained

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high and also ensured lucrative rewards for smugglers. Whether it cut alcohol consumption was debatable. Unlike Mediterranean countries, where it is almost unknown to see people drunk in public, although alcohol is very cheap, in Scandinavia, when they have saved up enough money for a good night out, they appear to drink with the intention of getting paralytic.

During the years that I travelled on them, the Baltic ferries, plying between Scandinavian and Russian ports, were invariably filled with Swedes and Finns enjoying the comparatively low prices and looking forward to a weekend of tanking up on Russian vodka.

Perhaps this love affair with alcohol also had something to do with the climate. Whatever the reason, the Latin races handled the bottle more responsibly than their neighbours in the frozen north.

The morning after my arrival, Willy van der Winden drove in from Berlin where he had finished his previous tour. We hit it off from the start. Friendly, intelligent and with a black sense of humour, Willy proved to be the ideal colleague. My friend's earlier description of him was reinforced as we discussed the details of the trip. Willy did know everything and was happy to share his knowledge.

Willy's coach was a DAF, Dutch like him. Built as solidly as an armoured car with, I suspect, the same suspension, the coach was perfect for the Russian roads, filled as they were with bumps and potholes. In fact, the clients found it comfortable enough, while my seat was constructed like an armchair and gave plenty of leg room, so much that people could actually pass in front of me to use the door, a feature that is sadly missing on modern coaches.

Later that day, we collected the clients at the airport. They were indeed older than usual and from their comments, several of them were also very experienced travellers.

"Have you two done many trips to Russia?" one asked. Before I could answer, Willy interjected.

"Between us, sir, Mark and I have been to Russia sixty-five times." He flashed me a grin as he said it and it was gratefully returned. With Willy in the background, it was easy enough to give the impression that Scandinavia and Russia were as familiar to me as my garden at home. Provided one prepared properly the night before, there was no difficulty in giving commentaries as we journeyed from Copenhagen to Stockholm. Local guides handled the city tours in both places, as they did in all the major cities on the tour.

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The Baltic ferry from Stockholm to Helsinki was a beautiful ship. The cabins were luxurious, the food plentiful and excellent. The whole group disembarked in a great mood. They were anyway good travellers. On this coach there were thankfully no specimens of that curious species which finds it impossible to tolerate or even to conceive of life without air-conditioning.

Since in many parts of the world, human beings self-evidently can survive temperatures between 20°F and 120°F without technological help of any kind, it has always seemed strange to me for people to complain about terrible heat when the temperature creeps above 75°F.

Once, a client from New York told me that he left his car engine running all day long in the summer so that the air-conditioning could keep it cool enough for him when he came out of the office.

“But what about the damage?” I asked, thinking about the pollution if everyone behaved like him.

“There’s no damage,” he replied. “The engine can take it without overheating – no problem!”

We stayed in Finland only twenty-four hours; a pity because it looked an interesting country. Helsinki was small for a capital city, with only 400,000 inhabitants; but it was comfortable and clean and the people were hospitable, although with that distant, detached look in their eyes that is common in so many northerners.

The Soviet border guards were waiting for us on the other side of the frontier at Yulya. On the coach, the atmosphere was excited but a little tense. No-one expected trouble; but this was after all the Soviet Union, which Alexander Solzhenitsyn had only recently, and vividly described in his *Gulag Archipelago*, so who could be sure what would happen?

Nothing happened. The guards were unsmiling and none spoke any western European language; but they were correct and not at all threatening. Our suitcases were searched thoroughly and some clients had to empty their pockets.

They took particular care with me, presumably on the assumption that as a tour manager, I would know enough to smuggle in goods to sell on the vast and indestructible Soviet black market. There would have been little point, since the consequences of being caught would have far outweighed any possible rewards.

They also gave Willy and his coach a very close scrutiny. The coach was driven over an inspection pit and whilst mechanics poked

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around underneath and shone torches up into the chassis, other officers went through the passenger area, peering into every corner.

This inspection, as meticulous as it was, did not compare with the treatment given to a Polish coach at the exit border near Brest, eight days later. It had already been there for three hours when we arrived and the search was still going on when we crossed into Poland.

The Polish tourists had been made to lay out all their possessions in the Customs hall and the coach itself had been partially stripped. The wheels and brake-drum covers were lying beside it and the mechanics were turning their attention to the engine compartment. I thought the guards must have had a tip-off. Willy disagreed. He had frequently seen Polish coaches and groups subjected to that sort of treatment and since no Soviet guide would answer his questions, could only conclude that either the Poles were inveterate smugglers or the Soviets thoroughly disliked them. Maybe both reasons were true. The Poles certainly hated the Russians. I did five tours there altogether and each time we picked up our Polish guide at the border, he or she would ask the group, "Aren't you glad to be out of the Soviet Union? Why do you spend so much time in that country? Poland is much, much better."

We stayed at Yulya for almost an hour and a half, before being cleared by the Customs. It was just forty miles to the first stop in the town of Vyborg, where we were to have lunch and collect our *Intourist* guide.

Vyborg had been Finnish until it was annexed by the Soviets after the Winter War of 1940. Nearly forty years later, the town bore the marks of decay and neglect. The restaurant above the railway station was in the same state of disrepair and food and service reflected this. Fortunately by then, we had already met the guide.

Olga was only twenty-two and could have passed for eighteen. She was one of the few Russians I ever met who did not appear secretive and reserved at first meeting; but who instead bestowed a spontaneous and very charming smile, at least on foreigners. With other Russians, her mask of impassivity was slipped on immediately.

I saw it first when we entered the restaurant and discovered that for some unknown reason, every table had been laid for three. Olga's first feat was to persuade the surly, uncooperative waitress to relay them all for four people. But she could do nothing about the food, which lived down to our worst expectations. Caviar and champagne swam into my mind; but this did not seem the right moment, especially with a four-hour drive to Leningrad yet to come. Instead, Willy and I struggled to eat something described as a lamb

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chop. As far as I could tell, before repulsion ended any further investigation, it was a half-cooked lump of almost pure, gristly fat. As promised though, the bread was quite tasty and filling and after washing it down with an unusual apple juice, one had the fleeting impression of dining well.

On the drive to Leningrad, Olga gave out a good deal of information; but few, I think, took it in, for they were too busy absorbing the impact of their first glimpses of the Soviet Union.

Between Vyborg and Leningrad the road passed for most of its length through a region of forest and small villages. The houses were wooden, painted blue and looked at least a century old. They were not. The Germans had come that way in 1941 and had destroyed everything. The Russians had rebuilt during the fifties. These new houses were not dilapidated; on the contrary, they looked well cared for and very comfortable. It was some time before a nagging but elusive realization finally surfaced and I was able to grasp its significance. These villages and all the villages we saw in the following days had been built by minds that did not belong to the twentieth century.

Look at even the smallest modern villages and little towns in Western Europe and North America and you will see houses that have been imposed on their surroundings by people who must have been completely alienated from any contact with nature. There is a mediocrity about so many of these houses that shows in every clumsy line, in every ridiculous imitation of architectural styles that have been looted from other cultures and other lands without their essence being understood or even suspected.

In contrast, in Russian villages, the traditional wooden houses do not so much stand on as grow out of the soil. They are as alive and as much a part of the land as the Russian peasant who built them. The peasant makes no conscious attempt to build himself a house that is completely integrated with its surroundings; he creates only what lies already within himself and could not do otherwise.

Of course, in this respect the Russian peasantry is not unique. One can see the same unconscious integration with their world in all rural communities that for whatever reason, have not embraced modern technology.

Soviet cities gave a very different feel. With the exception of Leningrad, which exuded a vigorous and graceful spirit, and Moscow, whose importance and power helped it to transcend its numbingly awful apartment blocks, the other cities on our route produced a feeling of sadness. Millions of people had starved, been worked to death or fallen defending their Russia, only to have their sacrifices

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dishonoured by leaders who compelled their fellow citizens to live in cities where daily life was an unending fight for basic necessities and where crumbling concrete and rusty plumbing bore witness to the results of separating people from the responsibility for their own work.

All these thoughts only gradually evolved during our journey. Leningrad produced no such feelings, but rather admiration and respect for the tenacity and imagination that its citizens had shown in rebuilding it after the Nazi siege of nine hundred days had destroyed most of the city and many of its inhabitants.

Our hotel, the Europaiska, was located just off Nevsky Prospect, the city's main thoroughfare. Potted palms, marble columns and high ceilings testified to its nineteenth century origins, while its atmosphere still gave faint hints of the Tsarist times in which it had flourished. It was a perfect place to stay.

Foreigners have written numerous books about Leningrad and it would be superfluous to repeat here all the comments about the city's tourist sites; but one feature did stand out – the casual brutality of Russians holding any official post, towards their fellow citizens.

Willy, Olga and I had some free time to spare and decided to have a snack at a restaurant near the hotel. There was a line of Russians at the door, waiting patiently for tables, which were being allocated by a large, dour woman who thrust out her arm as we approached. I was ready to join the back of the line; but Olga advanced confidently, exchanged a few words and we were ushered through.

“What did you say?” I enquired.

“I told her you were foreign guests,” replied Olga.

At that moment, an argument broke out between the woman and the elderly man at the front of the line. He wore an old, worn-out suit, with four rows of medal ribbons on the breast. Suddenly, the woman gave him a hefty shove in the chest and he staggered back, muttering, then turned and walked away. Olga saw our curiosity and translated.

“He was complaining about us. He wanted to know why foreigners were allowed to jump the line when Russians had to wait. The woman told him to mind his own business and when he kept on complaining, she pushed him away and told him she wouldn't give him a seat at all.”

My astonishment must have shown very plainly. Olga smiled with embarrassment.

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“You have to understand that we do not want foreigners to be kept waiting because it may give them a bad impression. And then this man challenged the woman’s authority, so she became very cross. It’s stupid to argue with authority in our country.”

This was no isolated incident. I saw many such examples on that trip and subsequent ones. Perhaps it should not be surprising, since authoritarian rule has played such a large part in the centuries of Russian history.

Of Novgorod there is little to tell. After leaving Leningrad, we spent only one night there in an Intourist hotel, which displayed all the deficiencies of modern Russian construction techniques. It had been open for two years, but the elevator had not been installed, although the shaft had been built. Misha, the porter, performed Olympian feats of strength and endurance, running backwards and forwards between the bus and the second floor with a suitcase in each hand. Afterwards, soaked in sweat, he lit a western cigarette, took a drag so deep that the smoke must have reached his toes, let out a wheezing cough that sounded more like a death-rattle and gradually allowed his face to break into a contented smile. Every time I saw him again, he went through the same routine.

Between Novgorod and Kalinin, we made our first bush stop. Highway restaurants were unknown and there were no toilet facilities either, so there was nothing for it but to use the forest. Everyone could pick their own tree. The men crossed the road to the left and the women stayed on the right. Amidst much laughter, the group disappeared and re-emerged some minutes later. All it seemed had enjoyed themselves, apart from one woman who had already reached the point of no return in her ritual, when it became apparent she was standing in a marsh. Her efforts to extricate herself before she sunk up to her waist, left her covered in black mud. There was a delay of fifteen minutes while Willy hauled out her suitcase and she vanished once more into the forest to change. This time she was completely successful.

Forest interludes became a great favourite. There were no lines, no fumbling for small change and provided it was not raining, comfort was assured.

Moscow as the capital of the Soviet Union, inevitably attracted the country’s most ambitious citizens. Their drive and forcefulness were reflected in the rhythm of energy that pulsed through the city twenty-four hours a day. But Moscow had none of the charm of Leningrad. People went to the capital to further their careers and also because its citizens received allocations of goods that were almost unattainable elsewhere in the country.

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Our local guide, Natalya, was a Muscovite. She was competent but impatient and obviously thought the group was privileged to be honoured with her presence. Willy and I both took a dislike to her and Willy showed it. Natalya was standing at the front with the microphone in her hand, pointing out the sights.

“As we turn left, you will see the Bolshoi Theatre, which is the most famous of our city. The theatre was built in.....”

Facing Willy to signal him to turn, Natalya faltered in mid-sentence for as Willy gazed back at her, his lower teeth began to drop slowly until it seemed they must fall on to the steering wheel. At the last second they were snapped back into place and simultaneously rattled against his uppers. They sounded like castanets at a flamenco dance. Shaken, Natalya hurriedly looked away; but her concentration had been broken. No longer so poised, she began to stumble over her words. After a few minutes she had almost recovered when she made the mistake of glancing again in Willy’s direction. The castanets once more rattled out their message and once more Natalya lost the thread of her commentary. From then on, she began to behave like a Pavlovian dog waiting for the bell to ring.

Olga and I sat together in the first row, silently transfixed with mirth and deeply impressed with Willy’s apparently miraculous control of his dentures. He grinned round at us and muttered in a stage whisper, “Sabotage!”

The guide in Smolensk was another matter altogether. Willy told us about her beforehand.

“Her name is Valentina; she’s built like a bear and she fancies me so she always gives me a big hug. It’s very painful.”

My first view of Valentina’s massive frame crossing the road outside the Smolensk Tourist Office reminded me not so much of a bear as a hippopotamus in a hurry. Her hug for Willy though, was undoubtedly bear-like.

“Ah! My little Willy!” she simpered loudly. Willy, feet dangling several inches off the ground and arms pinned tightly to his side, peeped over her shoulder at me with a “see what I mean” look in his eye.

Like Gertrude on the training tour, Valentina had what is known as *presence*. She may have looked like one of *Pravda*’s pin-up girls from Novsibirsk Heavy Machinery Factory Number Five; but you forgot this as you listened to her. Her commentary, her smile, her entire body were suffused with an enormous enthusiasm for life. The

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clients were all completely captivated and listened without a sound as she unfolded the history of her city. At the end of the tour, they broke into loud and prolonged applause. We left her reluctantly at the office in the late afternoon and made our way to the hotel, which lay a few miles outside Smolensk in open countryside.

The hotel was called *The Phoenix*. If as its name suggested, it had indeed risen again from the ashes, then I cannot imagine what the previous establishment must have been like. The building we approached bore an ominous resemblance to an abattoir. The Reception Clerk might well have worked in one at some time in his career, judging by the warmth of his greeting. The *Intourist* brochure described it as “First Class” – as an abattoir it might have scraped into that category; as a hotel, it was just preferable to sleeping under a railway bridge.

Willy of course had been there before and had already told me that it was “unforgettable”. All these years later, I can still agree with him. I had therefore already prepared the group; but even so they were stunned into silence as we entered our respective rooms, which were all in the same corridor on the second floor.

The first thing to strike me was the bathroom, where the rust marks from the disintegrating pipes had been washed into long brown streaks across the floor. The second thing that struck me was a squadron of mosquitoes. Flying from the direction of the open window, they homed in on me in close formation. Defence against such an unexpected attack was out of the question. Before I had time to react, they were already airborne again, after what must have been a very satisfying starter for the evening meal. The main course was obviously going to be provided at dusk, and I did not want to be around to witness it.

Some of the mosquitoes, presumably too full to fly very far, had settled on the wall. Grabbing a newspaper, I grimly set about retaliation. The same thought had apparently occurred to previous guests as the walls were covered with splattered remains, showing as red blotches on paint of the most lurid and repulsive green colour. Undeterred, I added to the carnage with great vigour. Five years later, I happened to return to the same room. The previous summer, the hotel had been renovated in honour of the Olympics; but they had not bothered to scrape off the mosquitoes first. Two modest green bumps just under the window sill marked some of those I had dispatched in 1976.

Willy and I discussed the problem over dinner and as usual, he had a suggestion.

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“They don’t come into the room if you smoke,” observed Willy helpfully. Willy rolled his own cigarettes, which he smoked incessantly, also whilst driving, since in those days it was allowed on the coach. He had developed an interesting method of jamming his knees against the steering wheel to leave his hands free for the delicate task of rolling a cigarette of exactly the right thickness. The tobacco was Dutch, almost black in colour, and gave off a smoke that had the same effect as CS gas on those unfortunate enough to be within range. It would undoubtedly kill mosquitoes; but in my little room with the windows closed, it might also kill me.

In the end I compromised. Willy rolled up five for me and I smoked them all before going to sleep. The next morning, my throat felt as if it had been massaged with sand paper; but there were no mosquitoes.

Willy’s suggestion had been passed on to the clients and a few had decided to give it a try. Those who did not displayed impressive evidence of the mosquitoes’ nocturnal activities all over their face. We were glad to leave the Phoenix but proud to have survived it.

The next city, Minsk, marked our last night in Russia and after an uneventful city tour and a night’s sleep blessed by a complete absence of mosquitoes, we crossed the border into Poland the following day.

The Russian guards, like their counterparts at Yulya, were uncommunicative but correct towards us. But their paperwork and that on the Polish side kept us at the border for three hours, about normal, as I found on subsequent trips. These days apparently, it goes much faster.

Poland looked bitterly poor but, as there had been in Russia, there was a warmth about the villages and small towns we passed, as we carefully overtook dozens of horse-drawn farm carts on our way to Warsaw. The city had been entirely rebuilt after the war and yet exhibited a seediness that appeared to be woven into the fabric of nearly all eastern European cities. However, the Poles themselves had a more open and vivacious demeanour than the Russians.

Natural entrepreneurs, they made no secret of their interest in our dollars. Whereas in Russia, the black market dealers had approached tourists with conspiratorial care, in Warsaw there was no sense of danger. The government forbade Poles to buy hard currency except through official channels; but at the same time, allowed citizens to hold hard currency accounts at the bank and did not enquire too closely where the money came from. The black market rate was 120 Zlotys to one US dollar, against thirty to one with the

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official exchange rate. With that sort of profit margin, business was brisk.

One of the younger clients, Wesley Grayston, had been feeling unwell with stomach pains for the previous two days. He admitted that the likely cause was the consumption of half a bottle of vodka at the Phoenix to try and drown the awful reality of his room. However, since the pain was still there it was decided he should pay a visit to the hospital in Warsaw whilst the group was sightseeing. The local guide wrote out the address for him and a brief Polish translation of his symptoms before putting him in a taxi.

Late in the afternoon, he reappeared. Arriving at the hospital, he had shown the note to the elderly receptionist, who spoke no English. Using sign language, she had given him lengthy directions to the appropriate out-patients' clinic. For two hours he sat in the waiting room as those ahead of him disappeared into the doctor's surgery. Obviously a foreigner, he began to feel uncomfortable under the surreptitious stares of his fellow patients and was glad when his turn came. The doctor was a middle-aged woman.

"Do you understand English?" was Wesley's first question.

"Yes, a little," replied the doctor, smiling faintly.

"Well, Doctor, I have a bad stomach ache and hope you can give me something for it."

The doctor smiled again.

"That I doubt, unless your case is most unusual. This is the anti-natal clinic."

Wesley hurried out, with freshly written instructions clutched in his hand. He suddenly realized, as he blushed under their interested stares, that everyone in the waiting room was a woman. He did get his stomach ache fixed though and it was the vodka.

At the Polish-East German border, both sets of guards exactly reflected their country's character. The Poles were relaxed to the point where some were walking around with their uniforms completely unbuttoned. Quite unabashed and in front of his colleagues, one officer asked if we had any vodka and took the proffered litre bottle with a smile. Since the duty-free shop on the Polish side sold vodka for a dollar a litre, the gift was a small one; but the shop dealt only in hard currency and was off-limits to the border guards. Nevertheless, the bottle undoubtedly oiled the bureaucratic wheels.

The uniforms of the Germans were well pressed and completely buttoned up. An officer came on board the bus.

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“You will,” he said, addressing me, “collect the passports and put them in alphabetical order and you will then bring them to the office.”

I had spent the afternoon in Warsaw preparing a special passport list for East Germany and had then taken it to be stamped at the East German embassy in the city. Now, all this preparation paid off and the border official swiftly processed our visas. To reach West Berlin we had to go through another checkpoint and the same procedure, as we left East German territory. As expected, East and West German guards were alert and efficient; but it was still 9 o'clock in the evening by the time we checked into the Schweizerhof, our hotel near West Berlin's famous zoo.

The clients' reaction on their return to the West was interesting. Their expectations immediately rose to the occasion and at dinner, they practically wallowed in iced water. The hotel was four-star and very comfortable and from my point of view, it had the great advantage that it was used by other groups from our company. Until the Russian interlude, I had not realized that a tour manager can quickly feel isolated if evenings do not provide the chance to meet other colleagues and talk together over dinner and a drink. In Russia, we had seen no-one we knew and by the time we reached the Schweizerhof both Willy and I were ready for an evening's relaxation without the thought of another long drive in front of us the next day.

John O'Hara, a friend of mine from the training tour, happened to be staying there as well and he and his driver Louis, a Belgian, made up our foursome at the bar.

John had been a successful journalist in Beirut before that city had erupted in violence and he had reluctantly returned to Europe. For him, the first season had been very enjoyable, thanks to his gregarious nature and natural optimism; but there had been a few hiccups. His colleagues were still recounting the story of John's discomfiture at Amsterdam's Schipol Fromer Hotel earlier in the season.

Together with a group of colleagues, John had spent rather longer than he ought to have done at the Fromer's bar one evening and had returned to his room in the early hours, only to be woken by what he thought was a knock on the door. It was a hot summer's night and John had decided to dispense with pyjamas. In this state, he opened the door a crack, saw no-one there, peeped a bit further into the corridor, overbalanced and heard the door swing shut behind him. What was he to do, stark naked at two o'clock in the morning, trapped in public with no visible refuge? Placing both hands carefully

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over his more noticeable parts, John decided to brazen it out and marched down the corridor in the direction of the desk clerk.

Suddenly, beneath the door of a room marked "Staff only", he saw a light. Sensing help available, he knocked softly. The elderly porter who opened it, gave John no chance to get beyond the "Excuse me" stage before slamming the door in his face. From sounds within, it was obvious he was calling reception. Sure enough, an agitated duty manager arrived within moments.

"Mr O'Hara, what are you doing in this state?" he demanded.

"I am afraid," lied John with great presence of mind, "I'm in the habit of sleep-walking from time to time."

"Ah, ha!" replied the manager. "In that case, Mr O'Hara, we will escort you to your room!"

They did, with the porter marching closely behind John and the manager striding just in front of him to protect him from any possible embarrassment. Unlikely, since John was unfamiliar with the feeling.

In fact, John was one of those people who frequently find themselves in challenging situations. That very evening, at the Schweizerhof, he had made a memorable impression on the Reception staff. John's considerable talent with language unfortunately extended only to English. No matter how hard he studied, European languages seemed to elude his grasp. Having struggled unsuccessfully with German since the start of the season and suffered the amusement of his colleagues, he decided to make a special effort for his first time in Berlin and carefully researched the German translation for "Good evening. I am the tour leader." On arrival, he strode confidently up to Reception and announced himself in perfect German.

"Guten Abend! Ich bin Gruppenführer O'Hara."

The desk clerk stared at him for a fraction of a second, an incredulous smile spreading across his face before he managed to reply,

"Zu Befehl, Herr Gruppenführer!" he snapped back, at the same time holding himself rigidly to attention and clicking his heels. John had been prepared for a nod of approval for his linguistic effort; but this reaction seemed unnecessarily dramatic and even faintly disturbing. A well-dressed German businessman checking in next to John, turned to him.

"You are English? He asked. "You are probably surprised at the clerk's reaction. It is because you have just announced yourself as an SS general and the clerk made the correct response. The word

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you need is 'Reiseleiter.' Do not worry," he chuckled, it is just a little German joke!"

John was reminded at that moment of Peter Ustinov's observation that a German joke was no laughing matter. There and then, he decided to have nothing more to do with strange foreign tongues and was known henceforth by his colleagues as John-speak to me in English or not at all-O'Hara.

The four of us got to bed late that evening; but it had been worth it, for I had not realized how melancholic I had become in Eastern Europe until our conversation at the Schweizerhof bar. It was not just the pleasure of meeting friends again; it had as much to do with being able to hold a discussion in public without having to choose one's words with care lest they got the other person into trouble with the authorities.

The drabness and seediness of the city streets, where the lack of colour in people's clothes and complexions contrasted with the gaudiness of huge posters, emblazoned with cynical political exhortations, gradually infected one with a sense of the deepest weariness.

West Berlin was at the other end of the spectrum. Enormous and conspicuous wealth, main thoroughfares choked with the latest Mercedes and BMWs, adverts for every kind of product and service filling the windows of magnificent stores, elderly ladies enveloped in the most expensive furs and bedecked with fine jewellery, and all brought into being and driven by the frenetic almost hysterical energy generated by this capitalist bastion deep inside communist Europe.

It was overwhelming and the effect was sharpened further after morning sightseeing, by an excursion through the Wall at Checkpoint Charlie and three hours in East Berlin. The group knew by now what to expect and used their eyes instead of listening to the guide who, to be fair, gave as accurate a description of the city as possible within the restrictions of his official position.

By tea time, we were back in the West and everyone used the few remaining hours to look around on their own. That night, we gathered for the last dinner of the tour. Talk turned naturally to the experiences of the previous three weeks. There was general agreement that the eastern part of the trip had been not so much a holiday as an expedition, hard at times; but an experience that had been well worth the effort and which had altered many previous perceptions of that part of the world.

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Wesley Grayston, fully recovered from his ordeal at the Warsaw clinic, summed up the view of his fellow Americans. "Now I'll be able to appreciate what we have at home."

Next day, Willy and I drove the group to West Berlin's airport. We had all been strangers to each other a few weeks before and yet, as with every good group, friendships had been formed and experiences shared. There were last-minute waves as they filed through passport control before we turned and made our way back to the parking lot.

For both us it was the end of the season, my first and Willy's nineteenth. The coach seemed very quiet with so many empty seats and with nothing for me to do except talk languidly with Willy as we motored slowly along the north German autobahn.

"It's always the same, Mark," he observed reflectively, as he jammed his knees against the wheel and rolled another perfectly symmetrical cigarette. "I'm always glad to finish and I'm always glad to start again. You see your friends at home and you catch up on the news and it's interesting for a while; but you're not part of their life and they're not part of yours. It's worse for a driver. We can't take time off when we want like you can because the coach has got to earn money every day."

He scoffed quietly and peered through a thickening haze of cigarette smoke at the traffic ahead. "Ach! What the hell! You pay a price for everything." He smiled broadly. "You'll see. This is a tough job to follow. It gets in your blood. Just make sure you never waste the winters or you'll throw away something no other job gives you."

Willy was right. As a tour manager you can travel the world free of charge; you can see more in a year than most people see in a lifetime of holidays and, come the winter, you can enjoy something that normally only arrives when you receive your pension – free time and money simultaneously. This is a great privilege and like all privilege, you have the responsibility of using it thoughtfully. If you abuse it, you become trapped in a meaningless cycle of work and wasted days. If you cultivate it with care and attention then your career as a tour manager can be the means to draw the fulfilment and contentment from life that only such thoughtful effort can bring.