

# ***Travellers' Notebook***

## ***Newsletter of the Blackbourne U3A Travel and Tourism Group***

Spring 2007

### ***Our tenth trip . . .***

*. . . and our tenth newsletter! The Travel and Tourism Group has developed over the past six years from a small group who met in each others' homes to a membership of 40 with a waiting list from which a new group, Travel To, has been convened. We have an organising committee who arrange talks, attend to our requests, and organise two trips each year down to the last detail. We also have our own newsletter that records our activities, reports on our personal travel experiences and offers travel tips. In this edition you will also find some 'travel notes'. These are snippets discovered while researching possible trips that I thought might be of interest to others. Sharing information is an important part of being a member of our Group, so if you find something of interest please send details (maximum 150 words) to me at [u3ab@anjucon.co.uk](mailto:u3ab@anjucon.co.uk).*

*JC*

## ***NOTICE BOARD***

### **Colin Dalton**

With regret we report that Colin Dalton died suddenly on 28 December 2006. Colin and Pauline were founder members of the Travel Group. Colin was also a past member of the Blackbourne U3A Committee.

### **Monday 11 June**

Antarctica *Anne Anstead*

### **Monday 9 July**

India *Shirley and Roger Bowden*

### **Monday 13 August**

Panama Canal and Central America *Judith Constantine*

### **Sunday 9 September**

Depart for tour of the Champagne region and Troyes

*Subscriptions, £7 for 2007/8, are now due. If you have not yet renewed please see Jan Dockerty.*

## ***OUR FIRST TEN JOURNEYS***

### ***by John Dockerty***

The first trip we made was in 2001 when a group of 24 travelled to Prague for a four-night stay. It was quite an adventure when it was discovered that the accommodation was in a student's block and several of the group found themselves sharing rooms! We returned to

Eastern Europe for our second trip in September 2002 when Budapest was our destination. There we were entertained at a medieval banquet, had a boat trip down the 'not-so-blue' Danube and lived to tell the tale after enjoying a wonderful meal at a restaurant called 'Fatal'!

The next year, 2003, saw us looking for southern sun when 33 members and friends stayed in a very central hotel in Sorrento and enjoyed interesting excursions to Pompeii, Herculaneum, Vesuvius, Paestum and the islands of Capri and Ischia. This was followed by an even more adventurous trip in 2004 when 14 members cruised down the Nile from Aswan to Luxor in Egypt. Again this proved to be an educational trip as we had an excellent guide and learned a great deal about Egypt and its antiquities as well as modern-day life.

We went to Central Europe in autumn 2004 when 23 members enjoyed a six-night visit to Vienna, a beautiful city rich in music, art and architecture. We had a wonderful evening at the Auersperg Palace listening to Mozart and Strauss and sipping champagne in the interval. Our visit included a day trip to Bratislava: many of us would have liked longer there. Another highlight was discovering the Heurigen in the villages of the Vienna Woods where we spent an evening being serenaded while we enjoyed traditional Viennese food and wine.

Back to Eastern Europe in May 2005 for Krakow where again we enjoyed seeing some beautiful old buildings and the largest town square in Europe. We also saw the tragic side of some of Europe's more recent history, notably the Jewish Quarter which was the location of the Ghetto in World War II, and even more poignantly Auschwitz. En route to our second stop at Zakopane we visited the World Heritage Site of the Wieliczka Salt Mine with a huge cathedral containing statues and chandeliers all carved in salt, and at a depth of 135 metres. Our last memory of this trip was a magical journey on wooden rafts early on a beautiful morning down the River Dunajec.

In September the same year we went to Tallinn in Estonia for three days. Tallinn is an Unesco World Heritage Site and is quite delightful with its medieval buildings and courtyards.

In April 2006 16 of us went to Marrakech in Morocco. This proved to be particularly interesting as the Moroccan architecture and culture were so different. We were thankful to have an excellent guide to take us around the souks, a maze of narrow alleyways where we were terrified of being separated from each other. The male members of the party particularly enjoyed the belly dancers. Returning from the heat of Marrakech we were greeted by a snow storm on arrival at the airport!

Then it was 'hang on to your bag time' in Barcelona: 33 members went on this trip. As there was such a large number of us we split into smaller groups to go around the city. Among the many attractions in this beautiful city was the amazing architecture of Antoni Gaudi.

And now for our tenth trip – a little different this time – by coach to Northumbria to enable as many members as possible to enjoy the fellowship of the Group and to celebrate the fact that our Travel Group has been able to enjoy each other's company in so many different places. Long may we continue to do so.

## ***TRAVEL NOTES***

### **North America**

With sterling now worth two US dollars a trip to North America is very attractive. There are numerous travel agents and tour operators who will arrange your holiday. However if you prefer to travel independently, you must first book a flight. The main airlines are

British Airways, Virgin and United Airlines. But there are now other options worth considering: the budget airline Zoom operates from Gatwick to New York, Bermuda and cities in Canada, while Maxjet flies from Stansted to New York, Washington and Las Vegas; the latter offers affordable business class comfort and local convenience. On-line quotes for a return flight to New York next October came up with the following prices for a non-flexible ticket: Zoom £154, Maxjet £875 both inclusive of taxes and surcharges. The cheapest BA economy ticket available on-line for the same dates is £534.

### **Solar eclipse 2008**

There will be a total solar eclipse on 1 August 2008. The path of totality crosses the arctic regions of Canada, northern Greenland, Spitsbergen, Siberia, Mongolia and central China. Everyone should experience at least one total eclipse: it is an amazing spectacle, and very different from a partial eclipse. Explorers is a UK company that specialises in eclipse tours throughout the world; visit [www.explorers.co.uk](http://www.explorers.co.uk) to find out more. For us here in East Anglia, one option would perhaps be to take a cruise on *MV Discovery* (which operates from Harwich), when you can see the arctic wildlife on Spitsbergen, visit ports in Norway and also experience the eclipse.

## ***EXPEDITION CRUISE WITH MV POLAR STAR***

***by Kathleen and Roger Beaurain***

The *MV Polar Star*, 5000 tonnes grt, was built in Scandinavia as an ice breaker. She is a small ship, 21 m wide and 83 m long, but has been well converted. We started our adventure at the city of Inca gold, Lima in Peru, and sailed south, rounding Cape Horn and ending in vibrant Buenos Aires. Highlights of the trip included a flight over the Nazca lines which comprise a series of geoglyphs drawn in the desert depicting both animal forms and geometric figures. Some of these were up to 900 feet long and were clearly visible as the aircraft stood on its wingtips to afford us the best views.

Off the coast of Peru, the *Islas Ballestas*, home to thousands of boobies, cormorants and pelicans as well as sea lions resting and at play gave us a fascinating morning. Bird-watching was a feature of the trip with over 130 species being recorded by the twitchers among us. Later, at sea, humpback whales were seen leaping out of the water and landing with huge splashes. Dolphins frequently cavorted in the ship's bow wave too, while petrels and albatrosses rode on our wake.

Chile provided us with fascinating cities such as Arico and Valparaiso, the latter being famous for its 13 funiculars. There were islands inhabited by the indigenous Indian fisher folk, fjords, waterfalls and glaciers. Using the ship's zodiacs we were able to get in close to the shore, often landing. Some afternoons, if not ashore, lectures were held on such topics as climate change, the food chain, tectonic plates etc. From Puerto Montt we went inland skirting the shores of a lake to see the Osorno volcano capped in snow but not erupting as it had for Charles Darwin in 1834.

Further south, we had a long trip inland to the Torres del Paine National Park, a beautiful region of wildlife and spectacular mountains. Navigational history was brought to life as we transited the English Narrows, the Magellan Strait and the Beagle Channel leading to Tierra del Fuego, Drakes Passage and the southernmost point Cape Horn. This, to us 'ex-yachties', was quite an exciting moment. Yes, we made a landing on the Cape and climbed to the top to visit the seaman's memorial, which depicts an albatross, and to look into the tiny chapel. We also collected our certificate from the authorities!

It was meant to be a trip of a lifetime – it was.

## ***TRAVEL TIPS***

### **Visiting London**

On a recent trip to London Ann and Tony Sear stayed overnight at the Travel Lodge, London City Airport. At just £26 for the room it was excellent value as was the optional very full breakfast at £7.50 each. The room was clean and comfortable. The Travel Lodge is only 5 minutes walk to the Docklands Light Railway (DLR) which links up with the tube and takes about 30 minutes to get to the centre. They were not disturbed by the planes and quite enjoyed watching them take off and land. It is an easy drive to this Travel Lodge which avoids the congestion zone. The car can be parked there for £5 per day.

Judith and Andrew recently stayed at the Hilton Docklands Hotel, Rotherhithe, which is converted from three riverside warehouses. It offers a comfortable and quiet stay; the river-front rooms have lovely views. Parking is free and the hotel has its own pier from where you can go by river boat via Canary Wharf (opposite bank) down to Greenwich and up to Millbank.

Judith advises not to buy single tube tickets – *a single in zone 1 now costs £4!* Either buy a travel card which can be used on all tubes, buses and the DLR. Or get an Oyster card: having paid an initial fee of £3, plus a suitable sum up front, all bus and tube fares are half price. You can top up as needed and reuse the card for future visits. There are no concessions for seniors except on the river boats. Transport for London ([www.tfl.gov.uk](http://www.tfl.gov.uk)) has lots of information, maps and a useful journey planner.

If you travel by car park outside the congestion zone ([www.cclondon.gov.uk](http://www.cclondon.gov.uk)). There are a number of stations not far from the M11 that have large car parks: Epping and Loughton (Central), Walthamstow and Blackhorse Road (Victoria Line).

### **Crossing the Channel**

Yvonne Yule recommends a cross channel company called Speed Ferries who operate between Dover and Boulogne. For a holiday in France Yvonne and her new husband, David, booked a single trip for their car plus two passengers on Euro-Tunnel and paid approximately £129. When they were ready to return they booked with Speed Ferries for £29. The crossing was fast (50 minutes) and comfortable. Staff were helpful, there were a couple of restaurants and a small tax-free shop. Crossings are perhaps not as frequent but they travelled at 3.00 pm which they found to be a very convenient time.

### **Currency exchange**

It can be useful to arrive at a destination with some loose change or notes of small denomination. David Love suggests that when people return from foreign holidays with unused currency they might like to work out an exchange rate and make it available to others.

## ***TRAVEL PLANS***

A number of destinations for 2008 were considered at meetings in February and March:

1. Dutch bulb fields by river boat (4-5 days, £350)
2. Douro valley by river boat (7-9 days, £850-900)
3. Croatia or Slovenia (7 days, £600-650)
4. Berlin and Dresden (7 days, £700-800)
5. Moscow to St Petersburg by river boat (7 days, £1000+)

Trip 1 to Holland was agreed for April 2008. Trip 3 to Croatia or Slovenia was the first choice for September 2008. The Douro valley was a close runner-up, and may be a

possibility for 2009. The committee will obtain further details about these two trips. Watch this space!

## ***FRANCE 2007***

We will meet at the New Green Centre on 9 September at 07:15 to 07:30 to board our luxury 49 seat Mercedes coach equipped with all facilities and which is scheduled for departure at 08:00. Our journey through the Channel Tunnel is booked for the 11:50 departure. Our scheduled arrival in Calais is 13:30 French local time. About an hour out of Calais we will stop for a 40 minute comfort/snack break at Rely. Travellers may either buy snacks in Rely or consume snacks they brought with them.

It is estimated we will arrive in Reims at about 17.30 for our first night at the Hotel D'Univers which is a Three Star hotel in the City centre. Dinner with wine is provided on the first night.

We will leave at Reims at 8.45 in the morning to get to our first tasting by 10.30. After lunch at Magny we travel to Troyes to Check into the Royal Hotel. A light dinner will be served in the evening. The tour continues as previously described with wine tastings, and lunches and the final dinner at the Royal Hotel on our last evening together.

All the wine companies, except Chateau Chamirey in Burgundy, accept credit cards. Chateau Chamirey deal only in cash. All wine purchases will be at ex cellar prices, which means the prices the cellars charge their wholesale customers.

Payment of the Balance is due for Monday 16th July 2007. £540 pp for double occupancy, £634 for single rooms. These prices include the additional £10 we agreed to cover for the additional dinner on our first night in Troyes. Payments should be made by cheque payable to Vintage Wine Tours Ltd. Your payments can either be sent direct to Vintage Wine Tours or given to Bob Mountfort at the 2 July U3A lecture meeting or the 9 July meeting of the Travel and Tourism Group. He will consolidate the payments and send them to Vintage Wine Tours.

All travellers will previously have received a mailing giving them the menus planned for all meals included in the trip price.

*Bob Mountfort*

## ***A TRIP TO THE GAMBIA***

***by Ann and Tony Sear***

On Monday 16 April we talked to the Travel Group about our trip to the Gambia in November 2006 and showed some of the many photographs that we took.

We were recommended by a keen bird-watching friend to go to the Gambia for a bird-watching holiday. Although extremely successful as such, it turned out to be of far wider interest than just ornithology. We did a bit of research and found out more about the country.

It is the smallest country in mainland Africa. In fact, it is the size of Yorkshire, 4361 square miles. Its capital is Banjul and our first destination hotel was only about a half hour drive from the airport on reasonable roads of which the locals are very proud.

The Gambia takes its name from the river that flows right through the middle of the country. It starts in Guinea and flows through southern Senegal and then into the Gambia until it reaches the Atlantic Ocean.

Up country the river is fresh water and bordered by lush green tropical forest while the lower reaches are mangrove fringed. The climate is pleasant, sub-tropical with two distinct seasons. From November to June there are dry Savannah winds with an average midday temperature of 27°C. The wet season is from July to October when all is lusciously green.

The population of this small country is dense: 1.5 million and growing. The birth rate is more than five infants per child-bearing woman.

The Gambia became a British protectorate in 1888 and became independent from Britain in 1965. Since then it has been a multi-party democracy with only two presidents since that time.

Sadly, it is one of the world's poorest countries with a national debt of £375 million, nearly twice the value of its annual exports. The average annual income is less than £200. Most earn their living from farming or fishing and families try to be self-sufficient within the compounds in which they live. The main export crop is peanuts and tourism has become a very important source of revenue.

Various ethnic groups live peacefully together and the Gambians seem to be very happy people in spite of their lack of wealth.

We were not disappointed in the bird-watching aspect of our holiday and saw about 100 different species, many of which were frequently to be seen in the hotel grounds. The first part of our stay was at a very comfortable hotel on the Atlantic coast where we were well looked after by extremely knowledgeable birding guides. We made excursions into the villages and learned more about the education system, health care, the work of the SOS Children's Village and the history of slavery in the Gambia.

The last few days of our trip were spent at the Mandina Lodges at Makasutu which are on a tributary of the Gambia river. This is an eco-tourist project being carried out extremely well by two Englishmen who came to dine with us one evening and to explain to us their aims and objectives. Here, we stayed with only six other people in absolute luxury – without air conditioning and electric lights and with a very efficient composting toilet! We stayed in a beautiful stilted lodge and our neighbours stayed in floating lodges. We were greatly outnumbered by the staff of attentive waiters, chamber maids and personal guides who looked after us so well.

We had a wonderful holiday and feel that we learned a lot about a country that we knew very little about before our visit.