

Travellers' Notebook

Newsletter of the Blackbourne U3A Travel and Tourism Group

Autumn 2006

This is your notebook . . .

Travellers' Notebook is now more than two years old and I like to think that members find it both useful and interesting. It is intended to be a means of sharing travel information. However, contributions to date have come from just a few whereas we had hoped that most members would contribute in whatever way they can. Sharing and communicating is an important part of being a member of our Travel Group. My job is to put the newsletter together and to make your information accessible. So if you have been away somewhere tell us about your experiences (good or bad), share your travel tips with us or comment about an aspect of travel and tourism that will make us think. This is your notebook! Let's make it truly representative of all our interests.

JC

NOTICE BOARD

Monday 11 December

Festive Christmas meeting with mince pies

Wednesday 3 January

Dinner at Ravenwood Hall

Monday 15 January

Orient Express and Elephants in Thailand *David Love*

Monday 12 February

The Gambia *Ann and Tony Sear*

Monday 21 May

Depart for coach trip to Northumbria

The Committee is always happy for volunteers to talk about their travels. Help is available for setting up slide shows from your own photos.

CHRISTMAS IN SRI LANKA

Roger and Shirley Bowden flew to **Sri Lanka** last December for a twelve-day holiday in Sri Lanka. After a ten-hour flight they arrived at the modern airport of Colombo. There they were met and taken to **Ranweli Village**, an island hotel built in a mango swamp surrounded by rivers on two sides. Access to the island is by a ferry punt and all deliveries have to be loaded and carried across the river.

Their garden chalet faced a sandy beach. It was hot and humid, about 29–31 °C, but the Indian Ocean was quite cold. The next day they explored the 35 acres of grounds. The island, which is a nature reserve, has lots of birds, flowering shrubs and water lilies. There were local crafts on display too. There were no flies or mosquitoes. In the evenings they were entertained by dancers whose main theme was fire.

They then set off for a two-night stay in Kandy. En route they visited the Pinnawela elephant orphanage and saw the elephants walk through the streets for their daily wash in the river. From there they travelled on good roads, many built by the British Royal Engineers, through hilly country to Kandy. Here they went to the Royal Botanic Gardens and saw various **Hindu temples** with up to 700 gods. The next day a visit to a herbal garden and a massage with oils was followed by a steep climb up to Sigiriya Rock where there is a fortress citadel. A fantastic Dambulla temple built inside the mountain rock with enormous statues and paintings dating from the 12th century completed a memorable day.

This part of Sri Lanka is 75 per cent Christian, and Christmas is celebrated with decorations, nativity scenes and white Father Christmases. At the hotel there was an elaborate Christmas Eve buffet followed by a visit from Father Christmas at midnight. Most of the staff attended church for the midnight service. On Boxing Day a service was held on the beach, followed by a barbeque.

Tiles are an important part of the local economy: Shirley and Roger went on a cycle ride around the lanes and visited a tile factory where they saw the hard manual work done by both men and women.

After a brilliant sunset on their last evening Shirley and Roger arrived home in time for New Year.

GIVERNY

by Ann Sear

At the meeting in July we showed slides and talked about our recent trip to Giverny in France. I had wanted to visit Monet's house and garden since 1980 when it first opened its doors to the public. It was a visit worth waiting for.

We found a beautiful old water mill to stay in, right in the village of **Giverny**. Excellent breakfasts were served either in the garden or in the beautiful panelled dining room. We enjoyed watching from our balcony the unusual animals that the family kept on their land – ostriches, emus, pot-bellied pigs, wallabies and tiny duckling having their first swimming lessons. We learned that Monsieur Guillemard's grandmother had worked for Claude Monet and we were told that when the artist could not afford to pay her he would give her a picture that he had painted!!

We arrived early for our visit to Monet's garden as we had been told that lots of coach parties arrive later. The garden was a riot of colour and just as beautiful as I had expected. It was easy to see how Monet became obsessed with both tending and painting the plants in his garden. The roses were at their best but there was also a profusion of clematis, poppies, tamarix, hollyhocks, iris, peonies, geraniums etc and the water lilies were just beginning to flower.

The house too, proved to be interesting. We saw Monet's studio living room where reproductions of his masterpieces adorn the walls, and the blue room with his collection of Japanese engravings. One of my favourite rooms was the beautiful yellow dining room with its huge table around which 14 people could easily be seated and where he entertained some of the great French and American artists of the era. My other favourite was the kitchen with its impressive shades of blue and shining original copper saucepans. One leaves the **Monet Foundation** through the workshop that Monet built in 1916 specifically to accommodate his huge paintings of water lilies that are now housed in the Orangerie in Paris.

The Museum of American Art was well worth a visit. The gardens are beautiful and the interior of the building is stunning and well organised to explain and compare what was happening in the world of painting in America compared with how American artists were developing in Paris under the influence of Impressionism.

We also enjoyed several visits to the Hotel Baudy which played a very large part in welcoming all the American and English artists who flocked to Giverny at the time of Monet.

AIRPORT SECURITY

Following the critical security alert in August, the regulations about what may and may not be taken onto an aircraft as hand baggage have recently been revised.

One piece of hand baggage per person is allowed: maximum dimensions 56 x 45 x 25 cm (55 x 45 x 20 cm for Stansted). A hand bag may be placed within this one bag.

Phones, cameras and electronic equipment are allowed, although large items must be removed from the bag for inspection.

From 6 November liquids are allowed, no more than 100 ml per item, in containers of no greater capacity than 100 ml (not part-full larger bottles). The bottles and tubes must fit within one clear resealable plastic bag no larger than 20 x 20 cm; this bag must be removed from your hand baggage for the security check. Larger containers must be packed in your hold luggage. Solid cosmetics such as lipstick are permitted.

Sharp objects and lighters are still prohibited.

Medication in tablet form, both prescribed and OTC, and up to 100 ml of liquid medication are allowed; for larger quantities a doctor's prescription may be required. This also applies to inhalers, epipens and sprays. Hypodermic needles and insulin sufficient for the journey are allowed

Once through the security check, liquids bought in the departure area can now be taken on board on all flights including to the USA.

A comprehensive list of the latest regulations, together with FAQs can be seen on the **BAA website**.

TRAVEL TIPS

Baggage allowances

When booking a flight, check that the baggage allowance will be adequate for your trip. Also remember to pre-book your hold luggage as free baggage allowances can no longer be taken for granted. Ryanair has reduced their allowance to 15 kg with a charge of £3.50 (£7.00 at check-in). Easyjet allows one bag free, maximum 20 kg. Flybe charges £3.00 per bag (£6.00 at check-in), maximum 25 kg, although you can take 10 kg into the cabin free of charge. British Airways World and Euro Traveller free allowance is 23 kg, but there are plans for a new checked baggage policy to be introduced. BMI allows a total of 20 kg free, but this can comprise more than one bag. When travelling to the USA most airlines allow two bags per person, but dimensions rather than weight determine the allowance.

Hotels in France

When travelling independently in Europe it is a good idea to book your hotels in advance. On a recent 'grand tour' of France which included Troyes, Lake Annecy, Provence and Burgundy, Judith booked all accommodation using Internet and e-mail. She found Alastair Sawday's ***Special Places to Stay*** well worth its price of £14.99: it describes in detail individual chambres d'hôtes, hotels and chateaux that would otherwise be difficult to find. All the places she chose proved to be excellent in their different ways and added to the French experience. Other useful guides are ***Relais de Silence***, ***Chateaux et Hôtels de France***, ***Inter Hôtels*** and ***Best Western France***. The latter offers good Internet deals. specials'.

LAND OF GEYSERS AND WATERFALLS

by Jan Dockerty

A small group of us visited **Iceland** for a week in June. It was a busy schedule but extremely interesting.

Iceland is a fascinating country: at first we wondered whether it was going to be a bit depressing as the scenery that we drove through en route to our hotel from the airport resembled a moonscape. This was in daylight although it was past midnight. We had gone well prepared for cold weather – the temperature varied from 9 to 11 °C.

We were fortunate in having as our guide David, an Englishman who had lived in Iceland for 15 years and was obviously quite devoted to the country.

Away from the lava fields the **scenery** was breathtakingly beautiful: dramatic rock formations, black sands, mountains and hills in different hues. The waterfalls were magnificent, and the geysers fascinating

A big attraction was the enormous amount of bird life we were able to see from a boat trip around the islands, the puffins especially, also a pair of sea eagles with a 12 ft wingspan

Our whale-watching adventure was a little disappointing as our inexperienced eyes were unable to see the whales before they had disappeared under the surface. We did, however, see two groups 'playing' out in one of the bays as we were travelling along the coast one day.

The miserable weather put most of us off dipping into the **Blue Lagoon**, which supposedly has many health advantages although three of our party did brave the weather and thoroughly enjoyed the relaxing properties of the water.

Reykjavik is a very modern and clean city with wonderful restaurants. We were amazed to learn that all the hot water and heating came from the geothermal springs. The cold water from the bedroom tap was spring water and icy cold, wonderful for drinking.

We would certainly go back again – but then there are so many other parts of the world we wish to see.

FRANCE 2007

As currently envisaged we leave on 9 September 2007 at 8.30 am and travel by luxury coach from New Green to Folkestone and then Euro Tunnel to Calais. Back on our coach we stop for a snack lunch in Rely en route to **Troyes** where we will have a four course dinner. Troyes is a 'ville d'arts' with many beautiful medieval buildings and associations with men of arts and literature. Henry V married Catherine of France here in 1420.

For the next five days we will take our coach from the hotel to vineyards and other places of interest. Every day we will have an excellent lunch included in the price; wine will also be served. Some afternoons we will visit more vineyards and others we will do some sight seeing and shopping. We return each evening to the hotel in Troyes where you can tour the town and take a snack and a drink. This is the Champagne area, where you can enjoy a 'coupe de champagne' at a café for €6. On our last evening we will have a dinner together in the hotel. On 15 September we will return to Thurston, arriving home at about 6 pm.

The price for this trip is dependent upon the number of people we take: for a party of 35 the price will be £605 per person, for a party of 30 the price will be £633 per person; single supplement is £94 per person.

Obviously we want the group to be in just one hotel and for that reason we need to give the tour operator a good idea of the numbers. So if you would like to join the tour, please contact Bob Mountfort as soon as possible. The tour operator, **Vintage Wine Tours**, will require a deposit of £75 per person in mid to late December.

BARCELONA

by Bob Mountfort

On 9 October 33 U3A members were at New Green by 4am ready for 4:15 am departure to Stansted airport. The coach driver had some problem finding us but phone calls from Val Adams tracked him down and we were soon off, in good time for the flight. The current security arrangements at BAA mean endless queuing in long lines to get checked and cleared. In spite of many notices and loud verbal advice from security guards, many people still had prohibited bottles, creams, gels and ointments in their luggage, which contributed to the slow progress of the check.

On arrival in **Barcelona** Ann Head's luggage was missing. After reporting the loss it was onto a coach for a tour of the city. The size of the city impressed but most impressive was the sight of the Sagrada Familia, the inspirational and most controversial church designed by **Antoni Gaudi** which he started in 1883 and where he lived as a recluse for 16 years. No words or pictures can adequately describe the building, its size, architecture and essence. It is fantastic, you have to see it to appreciate it.

On checking in at the hotel we were introduced to one of the hazards of Barcelona. While waiting to check in someone eased their way into the hotel foyer and out again collecting Bryann Ward's knapsack on the way. After a short walk to familiarise ourselves with the immediate neighbourhood we all met for dinner in the hotel. Before going our separate ways it was agreed that we would split into small groups to do our tours of the city. The arrangement worked well.

The next day our little band of six set off to tour the city. We took the 'hop on/hop off' open-topped tour buses which run at ten-minute intervals and cost just €22 for two consecutive days. We started with the southern route, which took us on a two-hour tour of the city, and stopped for lunch at Port Olimpic. From here you can see great beaches and an incredible selection of restaurants. We chose the Salamanca Barca where a three-course meal with wine and liqueurs cost €7.5 per person (plus tax and gratuities). Back on the bus, we continued our tour. Amongst the places we hopped off was the Spanish Villages. While the ladies shopped, Gordon and I had an ale or two. We were late back to the hotel and missed the group discussion.

The third day we visited Gaudi's Casa Battlo. What a fabulous structure! It is hard to believe that this was an existing house converted in 1906 into a block of flats. It is incredible, with curves and features which today would make it an environmentally 'green' building. Then it was hop on to the northern route. At the next hop off, we walked to another Gaudi delight, Parc Guell. Originally commissioned as a private housing estate, the plan was to create a mini garden city. The project fell through and left one of the most original public spaces ever built. It is a delight. We next hopped off at Monastery Pedralbes. Then on to **Barcelona football stadium**, one of the largest in the world seating 100,000 people. There we found an ice rink and hockey stadium with a lounge eatery where we had an excellent lunch. Gordon and I then toured the football stadium and the museum. 'Més que un club' [more than a club]. No time to waste, it was hop on again and on to Place Catalunya then back to the hotel, a shower and the nightly debrief. In the evening we strolled the Ramblas for a while before dining in a tapas restaurant where the Maitre d', Amadeus, selected some excellent tapas and helped us to choose main courses and wine.

On our last day we had planned to walk down the Ramblas, visit the markets and then take lunch. We had hardly got to the Ramblas when it started to rain – never mind, there was always the market. Not that day, it was a national holiday and the markets were closed. And so we drifted slowly down the **Ramblas**, past the great column with Christopher Columbus atop, into Port Vell, then along the sea front back to Port Olimpic and our favourite eatery, the Salamanca Barca. We sheltered in the tented dining area, hoping for the rain to stop. It didn't and so, instead of walking, we took taxis back to the hotel and waited until it was time to leave.

Then it was back to Stansted to meet the coach which was waiting for us. Our last drama was dear Ann Bubear-Baker tripping on the kerb and getting a nasty cut on her nose. At last we were back in Thurston some time after midnight. Another very successful and enjoyable trip. Our thanks to Val Adams ably assisted by Ann and Tony Sear, and John and Jan Dockerty.

[See more of **Bob's photos**]