

Travellers' Notebook

Newsletter of the Blackbourne U3A Travel and Tourism Group

Autumn 2007

NOTICE BOARD

Douro river trip

The boat trip on the River Douro in Portugal, proposed for August 2008, has been cancelled owing to insufficient members wishing to book. An alternative for September 2008 is being considered.

Monday 12 November

Wine tour in pictures *Ann and Tony Sear*

Friday 7 December

Social evening at the Cavendish Hall, Thurston

Monday 10 December

Canada *Ann and Tony Sear*

Monday 14 January

South America and the Galapagos *Ann and Adam Edmondson*

Monday 11 February

Slovakia *Kathleen Beaurain*

NORTHUMBRIA

by Sally Rands and Gordon Dalrymple

The Travel Group celebrated its tenth anniversary trip with a visit to Northumbria. We travelled with Simonds coaches to Newcastle, stopping on the way to look at The Angel of the North – which generated much discussion as to its artistic merits – and to see the Millennium Bridge, with views of the quayside development that is taking place. We arrived at our hotel, the Marriott Gosforth Park, just outside Newcastle, in good time to settle in and be ready for the first of our delicious evening meals.

The next day we set off to visit Bamburgh Castle, restored by Lord Armstrong, where we had an excellent guided tour by a colourful local character. In the afternoon we took a 1½-hour boat trip from Seahouses harbour to the Farne Islands to see the many puffins, guillemots and seals – an amazing sight!.

On day two we visited Cragside, built by Lord Armstrong, famous for being the first domestic house illuminated and powered by electricity. The next day was for many the highlight: a visit to Alnwick Gardens, designed by the Duchess of Northumberland, where the grand cascade is the largest water feature of its kind in the UK. In the afternoon we drove over the causeway to Holy Island where we learned about St Cuthbert and St Aidan who brought Christianity to this part of England.

All too soon the holiday was over and we left Newcastle on the Friday morning in time to have a three-hour stay in Durham where some of us managed the 320 steps up to the top of the Cathedral tower.

Our congratulations to the committee and thanks especially to Ann and Tony Sear for the excellent organisation of this visit to Northumbria.

TRAVEL TIP

Eurostar

From 14 November Eurostar departs from St Pancras. A new station at Ebbsfleet in Kent will have 2500 car park spaces. This offers an alternative route to the Continent to One Railway via Liverpool Street. An off-peak senior return to Paris is £59. Journey time from Ebbsfleet to Paris will be about 2 hours.

WINE AND CHAMPAGNE TOUR

by Mya Turgoose

Thirty-three of us met on Sunday 9 September – a fine morning that boded well for the trip – and luckily the weather was beautiful all week. We were soon off making good time to the Channel tunnel where, once on board, the champagne was cracked open – a little something to take our minds off where we actually were!

Our first night was spend in Reims and although we had a pleasant meal, most people thought the hotel somewhat lacking and were glad it was only for one night. We had time for a walk to visit the cathedral where one of the highlights is the glorious Chagall east window

During the week we visited three champagne houses with interesting explanations of the complicated process involved in making champagne. Also the village of Chablis to see two family owned domains. At the first, Michel Laroche, we were fortunate to be accompanied to the vineyards to see the grape harvest being gathered before returning to the old nunnery, where the company is housed, for tastings next to the 13th century wine press that is still in use. After lunch a visit to Domain Collet for more tastings.

A three-hour drive to Beaune took us to the absolutely beautiful Chateau Chamirey, set among lovely hillsides covered in vines. We were conducted on a tour by the delightful Amaury Devillard, a young man fortunate to be born into this aristocratic family. Afterwards, the driver got lost on our way to the restaurant and a 20-minute journey took over an hour. However, after an excellent lunch we had time to investigate the Grand Hospice, a very interesting historic building.

Troyes, where we stayed, has a delightful old town with well-restored half-timbered houses. A guided walking tour was arranged with the Tourist Office by Ann Sear, and was a high point of the week. The guide spoke excellent English, taking us into places we would not have found ourselves. There are many street cafés and bars giving the town a lively atmosphere that was a pleasure to experience.

My personal feeling about the trip is that it was marred by the long distances covered each day in the coach. This was tiring and gave no time to absorb the pleasures of just being in France, watching the French way of life from a café table and enjoying 'la difference'.

PANAMA CANAL

by Judith Constantine

We had long wanted to experience a journey through the Panama Canal – one of the wonders of the modern world and a 'rite of passage' for all serious travellers. On 15 December we flew to Barbados and embarked on the new P&O ship *Arcadia*, 82,000 tons. She is glamorous, but not glitzy, with interiors designed to echo the Art Deco period of the large liners of the 1930s.

Food, service and entertainment were excellent in the traditional P&O British style. Staterooms are of good size and many have balconies. A high standard of hygiene is maintained.

After visiting four contrasting Caribbean islands: Grenada, Mayreau, Isla Margarita and Curaçao, we arrived at Colon, Panama, 8° north of the equator – it was hot and very humid. We spent a day exploring Panama City and learning about the history, construction and operation of the Canal. It was completed by the Americans in 1914 following a valiant attempt by the French in the 1880s. Climate, disease and the complex geology of the isthmus presented formidable problems. During construction some 28,000 workers lost their lives.

Next morning *Arcadia* entered the first 'flight' of locks at Gatun. Electric locomotives guided the huge ship into position with only inches to spare. We spent several hours sailing across the Gatun Lake, 26 m (80 ft) above sea level, which was created when the Chagres River was dammed. Here we saw many container ships queuing for the locks. *Arcadia* passed through the Galliard Cut and then negotiated two more sets of locks before joining the Pacific Ocean. The transit took nine hours and cost P&O about \$240,000. Canal pilots are paid around \$25,000 per month. About 50% of Panama's GDP comes from the Canal. Last year the Panamanians voted to invest many billions into widening the Canal to take even larger vessels.

Arcadia then continued northwards calling at ports in Costa Rica, Guatemala and finally Acapulco in Mexico. Christmas Day was spent at sea with a visit from Father Christmas via the ship's funnel. It was a wonderful cruise marred only by the charter flight home on Monarch, which was long and uncomfortable with indifferent service and food. We complained to P&O and received a partial refund of the cost of so-called 'premium' seats.

TREATS FOR GRANDCHILDREN

by Ann and Tony Sear

A few years ago, when we were finding it difficult to know what to buy for the birthday of one of our grandsons', we hit upon the idea of organising a trip to somewhere that they would enjoy instead. So, we have now made several enjoyable visits with them which might be of interest to other grandparents.

Our first visit was to The Deep in Hull. The aquarium is a fascinating building resembling a ship. There are lifts that take you up to the top and then you work your way down towards the entrance with lots of creatures to see and information presented in a child friendly way. During the rest of our time in Hull we visited Spurn Head, and walked over the impressive Humber Bridge.

Next we took the boys to Woburn to the Safari Park which they thoroughly enjoyed, especially when the monkeys climbed all over the car, fortunately not doing any damage.

The following year, we visited Cadbury World and Warwick Castle in Warwickshire. The boys loved sampling the chocolate and having a go at writing and drawing in chocolate as well as collecting the free samples. Warwick Castle is a splendid castle and the boys loved the dungeons in particular.

The large number of museums at Ironbridge kept us busy for several days. The children loved Enginuity where there were lots of hands-on activities and where they were able to make rockets and have them fired. The Victorian village at Blists Hill was fascinating for them as they had to change their money into old pennies at the bank and then they were able to buy old fashioned sweets from a sweet jar and served in a paper bag (just like when we were young). It is a complete Victorian village where you can go into the various shops and homes and meet the inhabitants. There were other museums to visit including the Museum of the Gorge and the Tar Tunnel.

The next year took us to Kent from where we took the boys over to France on a day trip to Boulogne to visit Nausica, another splendid aquatic centre.

That same year we took them to Charmouth in search of fossils. This was very successful. The Charmouth Heritage Coast Centre gave us lots of helpful information and we were able to book in advance a guide who took us out onto the beach and helped us to find fossils and to identify them. After this session it was much easier for us to find fossils on our own and the boys ended up with a good collection. They spent their evenings making and labelling a display to show their parents. They had obviously learned a lot and thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

Last year we spent a week down in the Portsmouth area and found plenty to interest the boys at the Historic Dockyard. It is difficult to say what they or we enjoyed most as there is so much to see there but I think we were all very impressed with the *Mary Rose*. The boys also loved the interactive exhibits and simulators at Action Stations where they learned what it is like to be in the Navy.

In the October half-term we went to the Cotswolds where the boys were booked in for some horse-riding. This was a new experience for them and they enjoyed helping to groom the horses as well as ride them.

This year we are planning a trip up north to visit Hadrian's Wall and the open air museum at Beamish.

We should be grateful for more suggestions for future trips.

CHRISTMAS IN INDIA

by Shirley and Roger Bowden

Our son was married in May 2006 to his Indian fiancé in Cambridge, but unfortunately none of her family was able to attend. At the reception we all discussed the possibility of having a celebration in India at Christmas. The result was that 29 relatives and friends with their families, some from USA, Turkey, Morocco and UK all flew to assemble in New Delhi a week before Christmas, spending three days in Delhi. It was decided all the ladies and children would choose materials and have them made into sarees for the party.

There is so much to see and experience in Delhi – botanical gardens, wonderful historic buildings like the Red Fort, mosques from the 12th century onwards and of course the India Gate. There are broad avenues and parliament buildings built by the British Raj in the 20th century and now used by Indian government.

We then hired a small coach to travel with luggage to spend three nights in a beautifully decorated hotel which used to be a Maharaja's hunting palace where Edward VII, Churchill and Kitchener have stayed. We had the whole hotel to ourselves with swimming pool, courtyards decorated with wonderful mosaics, gardens and fountains. Farah's family all came for the party when we were entertained with a puppet show, fire dancers, then a formal dinner followed by dancing beside the pool. Next morning there was a visit to the 1000 acre Keloladeo National Park which was created in the 18th century from desert by the Maharaja to attract millions of water birds. There are over 370 bird species, 27 types of mammal and 43 species of fish.

The next day we drove to Agra via Bulland Gate Fateh Pur Sikri, an extraordinary deserted temple in wonderful condition covering several acres with temples and fountains, and then of course a visit to the 16th century Taj Mahal which is even more splendid than its photographs.

We then drove to Agra to catch an overnight train to Jabalpur, followed by a four-hour taxi ride to Kipling Camp on the edge of Kanha National Park, Madhya Pradesh, for five nights for Christmas. We were up next day at 4 am wearing very warm clothes, gloves, scarves etc, as it is very cold in an open Land Rover as you drive through the reserve looking for wildlife and tigers. The driver then produced a very welcome picnic breakfast with hot coffee, tea, and we all started removing gloves and jumpers as the temperature rose to 20°C in the sunshine. We then drove back to Kipling Camp to relax while the children painted Tara the elephant with

Christmas decorations in chalk – she knelt down so they could reach. Everyone then changed into their party sarees and Indian dress and assembled for Christmas lunch, but suddenly Tara arrived with Father Christmas riding on top and a large sack of presents for everyone. We then had a traditional Christmas turkey lunch and pudding, but no time to rest – a quick change and walk or ride Tara down to the river for her swim. Everyone joined in with her, diving off the elephant before scrubbing her down with smooth stones. She joined in the tea and biscuits, probably getting more than her share from the children. Then it was back to the Camp for carols, the evening Christmas meal with crackers etc and chatting round the open log fires.

We went into the reserve and the local village over the next two days and then it was the four-hour taxi ride to the nearest railway station, a ten-hour overnight sleeper back to Delhi, and the ten-hour flight to Heathrow and home for New Year.

Travel notes for India

Mid December is the end of the humid rainy season (about 20°C). Flights and trains get booked up by July/August as many Indians return for the Christmas break. Everyone seems to get 'Delhi belly', go to the local chemist to cure it (not Imodium). Use auto-rickshaws for local journeys for about 50p (negotiate before getting in). The taxi for the four-hour journey was £25 each with air conditioning. Second-class sleepers on the train provide clean sheets, blankets, pillows and have a coach manager on board if problems arise. Tea is 1–4p a cup on stations; meals are cheap, alcohol is expensive.