

AROUND THE WORLD WITH JUST ABOUT EVERYONE

Memoirs of a Far-Flung Tour Manager

by David Skillan

This article appeared in The Vancouver Sun in 1977. It brought calls from people who wanted to know how to go about becoming a travel writer, travel agent, tour manager, and other types of travel professional. I reproduce it from time to time for the benefit of people who know little about me. If I am to take people to the other side of the world, the more they know about me, the better.

During my brief travel-writing career I wrote numerous articles for newspapers and magazines (published along with some of my photographs), including The Vancouver Sun, The Province, The Times-Colonist, The Vancouver Courier, The North Shore News, The Toronto Star, The San Diego Union, Westworld, and Western Living. I gave up regular travel writing when I discovered that most travel writers (like many artists), unless they're very prolific or employed full-time by large publications, are as poor as church mice! Besides, it wasn't enough for me to merely write about my travels and adventures; I wanted to personally share them with kindred spirits.

After collecting your airline tickets, money for travel expenses, and other travel documents from the office, you meet the group members individually at the airport. You assemble the group. Introductions take place. The Hamiltons have already started chatting to Ralph and Mary Brown. A good sign. You begin your initial tour briefing, while the group members nod and smile at one another and shake hands.

Some people are apprehensive about travelling on an escorted tour, or are fearful of regimentation, and approach their holiday with suspicion. Others feel that their experienced and professional companion is a slight to their intelligence. These apprehensions have to be quickly dispelled. For your part, you are well aware that, for many, this trip is a lifelong ambition, and you're only too happy to help make their dreams come true.

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You speak slowly and deliberately. You are polite but firm; punctuality and cooperation are essential, for everyone's benefit. You assure them that they will have the time of their lives—they will. When you've finished, a murmur ripples through the group. Another good sign. You've already got their confidence. Now you can concentrate on your job—what you enjoy and what you're paid for—reconfirming flights, allocating rooms, organizing luggage, describing places of interest, and doing your best to keep everyone happy.

Your flight is announced. You lead the way to the plane. Once again, you are escorting people on the trip of a lifetime to the other side of the world. On the aircraft, you make sure everyone is comfortable, then sit separately from them. If you are to be the genial, debonair host for the next two or three weeks, you must be occasionally allowed a few hours to yourself.

You begin to reminisce and think about your job. You're the envy of your friends, as you jet off frequently to distant, exotic lands. But little do they know that, like all "glamorous" jobs, there is more to this than meets the eye. Apart from the obvious pleasure of seeing the world, the professional tour manager has more to do and contend with than most people think.

You must be all things to all people. Diplomat, confidante, friend, counselor, and guide, as well as first-aid attendant, porter, and general dogsbody. A sense of humour and the patience of Job also help. Always "on stage," you must always look and act the part, as you constantly play different roles.



You are expected to know everything, or at least find out. Where's the best massage parlor in Bangkok? How much does an Indian sari or an Egyptian carpet cost? Who is the current president of Bolivia? (They change almost every few months!) What's the gestation period of an elephant?

You've lost count of the number of tours you've escorted and the number of clients you've met. You've flown with more than 75 airlines (many dozens of times), and you've rubbed shoulders with the rich and famous and people from all walks of life. You've eaten every kind of food imaginable and you've seen most of the wonders of the world. And you're at home literally anywhere—on safari in Africa, in the Australian Outback, and in the finest hotels.



But you don't get blasé—just the opposite. You're just as enthusiastic as the clients, and you still get a tingling sensation of excitement up and down your spine every time you set off.

You wonder what will happen on this tour, as you think about previous clients and previous trips. You wander down the aisle of the aircraft to chat to members of the group, and to reassure Mr. and Mrs. Stewart. They are both in their mid-seventies and nervous about flying. You say something amusing, to put them at ease. They laugh and relax. You go back to your seat and continue to reminisce.

You could reminisce for hours, but you are interrupted. An attractive flight attendant wanders past, her thigh brushing your cheek. She checks your seatbelt. The flight will soon be landing. You tell yourself you have work to do. It's time to

get on with it. Unlike air crews, whose jobs are pretty well over once they land, yours is just beginning. After a grueling, sixteen-hour flight, and feeling like something the cat brought in, as soon as you touch down at Colombo, sweltering capitol of Sri Lanka, you attempt to organize the group and baggage while trying your best to appear cool, calm, and collected. At the same time, Mr. and Mrs. McGuire decide to wander off to change some money, and are promptly lost in the seething mass of airport activity. Oh, the pleasures of tour escorting!



*David Skillan continues to enjoy leading tours to exotic destinations.
For information, visit www.skillansafaris.com/david-skillan-tours.html.*