



## John Coles @ Travel-PA

Newsletter 12, July 2020



At times of uncertainty I like to recall my travels, browsing through photo albums and taking comfort in the happy memory of holidays enjoyed with family and friends across the world. Once again I am grateful to my family, friends and business associates for sharing their own travel memories and their personal photos. I do hope you enjoy reading their stories.



### Richard Ward, Kew

Where has the time gone?! In 1978 the world was, in many ways, safer than it is today. And I was an ambitious 39 year old. As a member of Richmond Round Table, I initiated the idea of supporting a deserving project in Kenya which was to be hosting the AGM of the World Council of Young Men's Service Clubs on 14th. September and which I wished to attend as Round Table Chairman. I decided to drive overland to get there!

I publicised the trip and 9 Round Tablers and partners organised the journey - no emails in those days! We all paid/shared our costs and expenses. We sent out 4000 letters by Royal Mail. We bought 2 old long wheelbase Landrovers, and delegated participants to be in charge of publicity, sponsorships, insurances, vehicles, baggage, medical, food water and fuel, finances, accommodation, travel & bookings, visas, security, sale of vehicles, records & photos. We had 2-monthly planning meetings at each other's houses for over 18 months.

We sought out an acceptable project - an extension to a school for hearing and speech limited children in Nakuru - and 46 Round Table Clubs donated £3750 all of which we took as a cheque to present at the conference.

Departure day was 5th. July 1978, from Kew. Our 11,000 mile journey took 11 weeks, through 12 countries at cost of £450 per person, plus Landrovers (which were sold on arrival in Kenya.) Our route was down to southern Spain, ferry to Ceuta, across to Morocco, Algeria, through the Sahara guided only by our compass and Michelin maps mind you as the road peters out at Tamanrasset. We camped out every night and cooked on open fires or ate from tins. Apart from Nigeria we were able to get by speaking French in Niger, Cameroun, Central African Empire to Zaire where we didn't see the horizon for over 3 weeks as it was (wet) jungle, and dirt roads with huge muddy holes many of which we had to winch through. We either slept in our tents in old quarries, or in missions run by monks or nuns.

By 11th. September we crossed from Zaire into Rwanda with 900 miles still to drive on some very dodgy roads but we arrived at 22.00 hrs. the night before we appeared on stage at the Conference to present our cheque. 10 days later we had sold the Landrovers and flew back home.

My notes tell me that our main problems, apart from the weather, were border/customs hold-ups and petrol shortages - sometimes we had to wait 2 or 3 days for petrol to arrive, and, fully laden with jerry cans, each roofrack held 70 gallons of fuel!

The bottom line? For me, I'd resigned my job to spend over 3 months getting tired, wet, hungry, and brassic. (I'd do it again tomorrow if I wasn't so old!) 9 people had experienced things that just can't be experienced today. We learnt teamwork, sharing, and tolerance. And, through our efforts, there is a better school for deaf and dumb children in Nakuru, Kenya.

Max Alter,  
London

<https://videomag-nets.co.uk>



## Dana Kadarova, Bratislava, Slovakia

Coming from Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia and a city on Danube, I am fortunate in having the chance to observe cruise ships and the mighty Danube on daily basis. As it is often the case, one tends to take for granted something which is part of his or her daily life. The same with me - apart from the occasional trips on boat to Vienna or other locations close to Bratislava, I did not have any real desire to set my foot on any river cruise ship for a multiday cruise. All that changed during CLIA River Cruise Conference in Paris where I got an opportunity to experience river cruise journey first-hand on marvellous MS Renoir, CroisiEurope's premium newly renovated river cruise ship.

This experience was spectacular – the ship itself was stunning, but the fine décor would not reach such an effect without the great service, delicious cuisine and friendly staff. The autumn time is not my favourite part of the year but we had such a pleasant weather during the trip that the colourful nature along the river, sunny afternoons on the deck, sipping wine or some other fine drink, pleasant walking tours through the French river ports have completely changed the way I usually perceive this time of the year.

We started and ended our journey in magnificent Paris however during our 4-night cruise we had a chance to visit other beautiful places of colourful and photogenic French countryside:



**Les Andelys** – beautiful little town on the Seine. Its main attraction is the ruins of Château Gaillard, a medieval fortress built by King Richard the Lionheart, who simultaneously was the King of England and feudal Duke of Normandy. The castle is situated on a hill above the town. It is well worth the climb. From the top we could enjoy the magnificent view of the river Seine (and the moored ships) as well as the surrounding countryside.

**Honfleur** – beautiful old river port at the estuary of the Seine. On the other side of the river, another port can be seen – the regular stop for ocean cruisers: Le Havre. Honfleur is a charming city full of small shops, historic buildings, parks and beaches, with many, many impressionist paintings. The whole area is so pretty, colourful and has such a positive vibe that it is no wonder it used to be a regular spot for painters and other artists.

**Rouen** – another surprise of the trip. There is a huge advantage of the river cruise journeys – one can see places we would otherwise never have a chance to visit because they just do not belong to typical bucket list destinations. Rouen is a great example of such a hidden gem from historical, cultural as well as architectural point of view. The old town has about 200 medieval half-timbered houses, some of them still make the home to stores, or even McDonalds. It is not hard to believe that Rouen was once one of the most prosperous cities in all medieval Europe.



## Tony Sit, Hong Kong

When you are sipping a cup of English Ceylon Tea, it is likely that the tea leaves are coming from Sri Lanka. The civil war in Sri Lanka ended in 2008 and the country has enjoyed some growth in tourist. Sri Lanka has a rich historical heritage, with strong Buddhism influence. You will also find the largest population of wildlife leopard in Sri Lanka.

One of the very impressive historical site is “World Heritage City of Sigiriya”. It was built in the year of 5<sup>th</sup> century (around 477 A.D. to 495 A.D.) in a steep slope and at the summit of a granite peak standing some 180m high (the ‘Lion’s Rock’, which dominates the jungle from all sides). It was unfortunate that the “Lion’s Rock” has been seriously damaged. The photo here is the “paw” of the “Lion”. You can imagine how magnificent it was when the lion was still intact.

Tourists can walk through the stair all the way up to the “head” of the Lion’s Rock. When you are up on the top, you will better appreciate the whole city of Sigiriya when it was in its glorious day. Infrastructure such as bath, wall picture, water supply pipeline... all of these showed a city in 477 A.D. with respectable intelligence and civilization.

You can spend a full day uninterrupted there, getting close to this human heritage... walking along the palace wall, imagining the Buddha students in 5<sup>th</sup> century studying near the palace, or the rich taking bath in the water pool nearby.



### **Ernie Miller, Sidcup**

Our very first holiday abroad was in Malta. At this stage nobody in the family had ever been abroad, except for my stint of national service in Germany.

So how did the holiday come about? We had a holiday camping in Scarborough the weather was terrible, returning to work talking to a couple of work mates they said you are better off going abroad as holidays abroad were well cheap in those days. One of them said he goes to Malta every year and he has the address of the owner who has apartments in Mellieha Bay. Winnie and Brian agreed it was a good idea.



We wrote to the owner who said she had two apartments (5 in one and 4 in the other) so we went ahead and booked them. We then had to book our own flight with Dan Air. Completely naïve, the owner wrote to us saying "do you realise you are landing at 2am how are you going to get from the airport to the apartments? My nephew Manuel runs a taxi service he will collect you". She then sent us a business card (4x2) and said when you get to the arrivals lounge hold the card up and he will find you. We landed and so did 2 other plane loads about 300 people. Raising the card above my head straight away a hand touched me on the shoulder saying "Miller 9, I'm Manuel". We drove off in the pitch black to the apartments. On arrival he took out 2 keys saying 5 in this one 4 in that one. We went to give him the taxi fare but he said "see me later in the week, I'm only at the top of the hill that is Mellieha town I'm behind the church" and drove off.

We opened the door walked up a flight of stairs and found there was a large lounge kitchen dining room 3 bedrooms and a staircase leading to a flat roof it was huge thinking maybe we were sharing this with someone else but no this was all ours. Winnie and Brian had the same with another bedroom. After a few hours sleep we woke up opened the curtains to beautiful sunshine. The next morning the same. The next morning the same. Saying we are so lucky with this weather, not realising that they get 14 hours of sunshine about 80deg every day, right through the summer. We've never been back to Scarborough!

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### **Brian Coles, New Eltham**

It was tempting to spend each day on Mellieha Bay beach soaking up the warm sunshine, but this was our first family holiday outside Great Britain, and we were eager to explore the island.

Our first excursion was to Valletta, the capital founded centuries ago by the Knights of St John. Wandering the narrow streets of the historic old town and climbing the city walls for views across the Grand Harbour, we soon learnt that in the Mediterranean climate it's unwise to do sightseeing under the midday sun!

Another morning we visited the town of Mosta, dominated by the Mosta Dome, a church built to resemble the Roman Pantheon. As we entered the spacious interior an attendant approached us and informed that we were standing below the third largest dome in the world. He explained how during a service in 1942, a German bomb pierced the dome and fell to the ground. Miraculously it did not explode, sparing the lives of the 300 strong congregation. He suggested we return the following evening for the "festival". We arrived that evening to find the streets thronged with people. Effigies were carried from the church on the shoulders of men and paraded through the crowd. When the Virgin Mary emerged from the church, the sky was lit up by fireworks and firecrackers created an almighty racket.



We travelled around Malta using the local bus service. They had recently received a dozen ex-London Transport single deckers. These had been painted green, but the interior retained the familiar notices requesting smokers to occupy the rear seats and lost property to be reclaimed at Baker Street. However, the children would not allow us to board these busses. Instead we had to wave them past and wait for an old 1950's vintage bus, where the driver's cab was adorned with religious artefacts.

One day we took the ferry to Gozo. We were met at the ferry pier by taxi drivers offering a tour of the island in their Mercedes. Our first stop was a nondescript house, where the owner was eating lunch. The taxi driver convinced him to abandon his lunch and take his guests down to his cellar. Here he unlocked a door and led us into an extensive network of caves with remarkable stalactites and stalagmites.

The highlight of the tour was the church of St John the Baptist. This had recently been completed after 30 years' work, undertaken largely by local people, led by a man who could not read or write. This huge church had been built over and around the old church, so that the parishioners always had a place to worship. Upon completion, the old church was carefully dismantled and selected carvings moved to a museum. The taxi driver proudly proclaimed that we were standing below the third largest dome in the world!

### **Barbara Miller, Sidcup**

As years went on, our travelling became more and more adventurous: Spain, Greece, Portugal, Italy and America. John was working out in Washington DC, so Winnie, Brian, Pauline and ourselves went to see John and all stayed in his apartment.

We did so much on this holiday. We toured all of Washington from the White House to Capitol Hill and the space museum. Went to New York for a long weekend by train. Also drove down to Delaware, over to Cape May and along the broadwalk to Atlantic City.



One very memorable trip was to the Shenandoah National Park in the Blue Ridge Mountains. We stayed in a log cabin with loads of chipmunks running around. On arrival we had to go to reception it was simpler to say we all came from London rather than our different addresses. She produced a map showing where everything was, one big log cabin for entertainment, another for dining it's up to you if you want to use it.

We went to see the entertainment as it was a dance competition the place was packed but we managed to get seats. At the end of the competition a lady got on the microphone and said "we have some very special guests here tonight" (thinking to ourselves who can that be) she then said if they are present would they mind standing up because they have come all the way from London England to see us. We then realised it was us and we stood up to acknowledge this and they gave us a standing ovation. They made a great fuss of us and had us up dancing with them the rest of the evening. A really great time.

### **Greg Cope, Cromer**

So, my wife Trudie booked two last minute seats with Caledonian from Gatwick to Tampa over the Christmas/New Year holiday. We often did (and do) just turn up and do whatever takes our fancy and on this occasion we had the vague idea of driving south towards the Keys. We mentioned this to a friend who had lived in Florida who said "you must visit Sanibel!".

After the Caledonian flight (I think, on an L1011: just shows how shattered I was that I can't remember), I was too tired to drive and so we checked into the airport Marriott. Refreshed the next day, Mr Avis gave us a nice car and we set off for Sanibel which (we hadn't even looked at the map) turned out to be about two hours south.



Not well signposted, we eventually left the hustle and bustle of the motorway and found ourselves on a causeway out into the Mexican Gulf with tropical views, sun and deep blue sea. The 30mph speed limit slowed us down physically and the laid-back, friendly welcome we received at the visitor centre did the same mentally: it was as if we'd entered a different, less-developed, relaxed world.

It was Christmas Eve and we were pointed towards the "Song Of The Sea", a beach resort close by which had a fabulous room overlooking the beach into which we happily flopped.



The following week was spent enjoying fresh fish and other excellent food, "shelling" (on what was apparently, one of the top three beaches in the world on which to collect) and even cycling on the beach as well as visits to the connected (and even slower/quieter) island of Captiva. We never even thought of the Keys.

We have been back several times since but the islands have been severely affected by hurricanes, causing much damage (which has been repaired but it takes time for trees and other nature to fully recover) and making us visit other Gulf islands such as Anna Maria which, whilst different, is also recommended.

### **Julianne Beach, Millwall**

We landed in Mongolia at sunrise in July. Everywhere we looked was green and hilly as the taxi drove closer into the city of Ulaanbaatar and our hotel. Soviet-style mass heating pipes ran parallel to the road for winter and Bloc architecture intermingled with western style shop fronts. We ventured around the city in the first few days, touring museums and monuments, shopping, eating Russian, Korean and Mongolian specialties, getting our bearings. I bought cashmere and local jewellery, and we explored small markets and the State Department Store.

We travelled out into the countryside to bbq in an open field surrounded by free roaming herds of horses, yaks, water buffalo and herd dogs. There are no fences in Mongolia and little to no infrastructure once beyond the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar. We camped in a traditional ger (yurt) in the mountains and tried our hand at horseback and camel riding. We sampled the tiny wild strawberries that the Mongolian nomads sold on the roadside. We listened to stories about shaman healing ceremonies and hiked up the mountains where Genghis Khan prepared his warriors. We sang karaoke with Korean tourists and tried Russian food and vodka, then played traditional table games using shagai (sheep anklebones) as a sort of dice.



In stark contrast back in the city of Ulaanbaatar, nomadic folk migrated in for the annual Naadam festival in July, some seeing the city for the first time in their lives. Families proudly wore their best deels (traditional robes) and poured into the stadium to cheer on athletes of traditional Mongolian sport (wrestling, horse racing and archery). The opening ceremony was on par with the Olympics, complete with the Mongolian President, thousands of dancers, animal parades, orchestras and a Mongolian throat-singing rock band called The Hu. We were even interviewed for Mongolian TV and spotted ourselves on news channel replays for several days. It will certainly be a trip we remember and hold dear.



### **David LeClair, Boca Raton, USA**

My wife, Dale, and I have been lifelong competitive swimmers and fans of the professionals in our sport. Now in middle age, we follow upcoming swim stars and take every opportunity to watch them compete especially live and in person.

When London hosted the 2012 games, John Coles was able to use his contacts in our industry and obtain tickets to the swimming finals including events to be swum by the greatest Olympian who ever lived, Michael Phelps. Needless to say we jumped at the chance.

Upon arrival we toured the city of London and found the organization and support of the thousands of local volunteers to be amazing. Every aspect of the event including transport and guidance in the city went very well.

On our first night, we attended a celebration in Hyde Park with a large screen showing swimming races and allowing all those without tickets to "virtually" participate and cheer for their home countries.

It was such a thrill to see the mix of countries and the level of good natured competition between each.

John also got us invited to the British Airways VIP lounge prior to the swimming event for which we had tickets. The CEO of our company, John, myself and Dale were able to enjoy some food and drinks in a comfortable environment in the midst of the Olympic village.

We were rubbing elbows with high level executives from our industries and others and bumped into London City Mayor, Boris Johnson. He was kind enough to ruffle his hair for a photograph and little did we know that within 8 years he would be the Prime Minister of the UK.



Not 30 minutes later I recognized fellow Californian, five-time Gold Medalist and world record holding Aaron Peirsol. It was such a thrill to meet such a humble and kind swimming great.

We enjoyed the rest of our trip, discovering Borough Market, one of the best local spots to enjoy market fare and proper English beer, and receiving some English pronunciation tutorials from John including Leicester: "It's Lie-ster.....not Lie – Chester"!

### Dee Kirtley, London

First morning in Bagan I cycled in the dark to the nearest big temple.

As I warmed up with the sun, I cycled for a few more hours round the never ending temples of all sizes rising from the orange sand. The carvings, wall paintings and massive Buddha statues had been there for centuries and yet were open for anyone to enter. I felt I was an explorer discovering these ancient over-grown relics for the first time.

The sand was fun to cycle in, except when I couldn't and fell over! Imagine, oxen blocking my path making their way to the river... followed by a genteel small man and stick. I certainly felt as though I was in another century.

5 days later I still hadn't scratched the surface - there are simply so many temples, most of which were overgrown proof that I was a rare visitor.

A little treat to myself was the obligatory balloon ride over the temples at sunrise.... and buying a hand painted sand picture by children who had followed the balloons path to see where we landed for breakfast.... and make a sale of course!



### Vicki Newport, Kew

As with many people who grew up in the Transvaal, (a former province in NE South Africa) in summer, 'Vaalies' (South Africa, slang) 'A tourist from inland' would travel to Cape Town or Durban for their annual holidays for the sea and sunshine.

I remember this trip in January 1981, I was 10 years old, when my mother, sister, brother, and I took the train between Johannesburg and Cape Town. It was exciting as we had two nights and a day on the steam train. The journey is about 1,600km (990miles). It operated daily in each direction and heading in opposite directions they passed each other in the night. The Trans Karoo was named from the Great Karoo scrubland, one of the most substantial geographical features of southern Africa across where the train operated.

We departed Johannesburg at about 10pm. At night we fell asleep on our bunk beds to the gentle chook chook sound of the steam engine, days spent looking out of the window at the scenery. The second morning we were woken by the sound of heavy rain: not expected in the Great Karoo!

As we crossed the bridge into Laingsburg we were horrified to see the devastation in the town and the debris the water carried. Looking back it was miraculous our steam train could even cross the bridge.

We arrived in Cape Town later that morning to the 'Cape Doctor' which is the local name for the strong, persistent and dry south-easterly wind that blows on the South African coast from spring to late summer.



We later learnt 425mm of rain had fallen on the Great Karoo over 2 days, compared with an average annual rainfall of 175mm. As the water level rose, the whole town of Laingsburg was under water. The river grew from normally small streams to a wall of water almost 6m high and when the river burst its banks, the entire town was swept away within minutes. At least 100 residents lost their lives in Laingsburg and the bodies of 72 people were never found. A total of 184 houses were destroyed leaving only 21 houses standing; not to mention the detriment to the farming community who lost all their livestock. Ironically, it was Laingsburg's Centennial Year.



This was one of the strongest floods ever experienced in the Great Karoo and is recognised as one of the biggest natural disasters in South African history. The Laingsburg Flood Museum is dedicated to remembering the town and all its people. Memorabilia, artefacts, and information continues to be gathered by the local museum for exhibitions.

I loved those train journeys, but this one was especially memorable because of the severe flood, which made a strong impression on my mind and reminder of the forces of nature and how things can happen.

## Helen Long, Thame

Just as in every previous year, we planned our 2020 Australia trip for January. The purpose, as usual, was to see both my sister in Sydney and my husband's brother who lives five hours south. Because my sister was holding a big party with 100 guests to celebrate a milestone birthday in early March, we decided to go a month later than usual. As it happened we got the timing just right, flying out on 13<sup>th</sup> February. By then, the bush fires, which had been raging for weeks and had closed our intended route down the Princes Highway between Sydney and Bega (where my husband's brother lives), had subsided, and reasonable amounts of life-saving rain had fallen. We certainly wouldn't have been able to travel any earlier than we did.

As we drove south down the NSW coast to Bega, we saw the devastation for ourselves, with blackened, burnt trees, road signs partly melted, and buildings destroyed in some of the affected towns, such as Cobargo and Mogo. We also witnessed tourists taking pictures of the destruction in these towns. At first this seemed macabre to us, but the locals were encouraging it in an attempt to keep the local shops and economy going. The most amazing thing was that the grass had grown back, with the verges and countryside beyond all a brilliant green. Some of the tall, blackened trees had already grown frothy green foliage up their trunks. It was a wonderful sight.

Bega, a pleasant rural town, had been an evacuation centre for 3,000 people from surrounding neighbourhoods during the bushfires. But the fires had only been 10k away from Bega itself. We heard terrifying accounts of what it had been like - the sky a blood red, with darkness even in the middle of the day. People said it was like being on Mars. Some had evacuated to stay with relatives in areas that weren't under threat; others, including relatives living 5k outside Bega, had been all packed up and ready to leave at any moment. A winery and restaurant in the area that we love to visit each year, located on a hill surrounded by forests, told us they had been evacuated 5 times in 11 days – they thought they had lost everything. Thankfully, when we visited, it was back to business as usual.



## Sebastien Boulard, Toulouse, France

A little step for men... Toulouse, the 20<sup>th</sup> of May 2020, the day after 77 days locked in my house.

We have all lived this period on different ways with personal experience, I don't have to complain as nobody around has been sick from this virus, my single stress is that I was not allowed to go to walk anymore...until this wonderful 20<sup>th</sup> of May!

5 A.M, bag ready, friend ready, perfect weather, the single question is the body, and the weight after 77 eating days...especially when you are French, lucky you are English people! No need to go far to be far after this period. We just go tour favourite mountain, les Pyrénées, and after 2 hours of road, we parked the car and started to climb.

These 2 days walk was pure feelings, as a wonderful wake-up after a so long night, as a freedom first day, as if we were allowed to see, smell, feel, touch the nature, the pure one for the very second time after a long blinded period. We had the chance to go in the middle of the mountain, be first men to put a foot on this grass, these stones, these hundreds of smells around us, these natural sounds of silences.

We walked until these wonderful mountain lakes to sleep there, watching the sky and mountains in the water, appreciating the different colours of lights, the sun going down and up. It was so close from a wonderful meditation, or a present from the nature. But in fact, deeply, what was it...why this need to go there?

First I think we were a little bit afraid to not be able to do it again one day. But moreover, we went there to apologize, to beg our pardon and give a little word to the nature. Our world is running into the wall for so complex and bad reasons, we all know it but we don't really do what has to be done by every of us.

We have to accept the reality, our "mother earth" is so nice, so incredibly deep and high, so timeless and diverse that she will surely survive to us, we just have to apologize for this temporary fever that we are creating. We have to deserve to be a small part of the nature and nothing else, the rest is human pretentious. I deeply feel it there. It is why I walk.